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RUSSIA: Are Kalmykia's Protestants "western spies"?

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

Foreign missionaries working with Protestant communities in Kalmykia, the Lord's Love evangelical church and the Salvation Army, have been barred from Russia, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Citing the FSB (ex-KGB), they have been attacked in the local state press as "western spies" who "frequently operate within various missionary organisations, hiding behind lofty charitable ideals." Commenting on efforts by the Salvation Army, Christian Missionary Alliance and Mission Aviation Fellowship to overturn entry bans, the newspaper said this "just goes to show how greatly intelligence agencies are interested in their presence in Kalmykia." After the article described the Salvation Army as "one of the most powerful totalitarian sects in the world", it was banned from holding events for children, Forum 18 has been told. Despite this, local authorities still seek the aid of Protestants to help needy people the authorities cannot help and to assist with anti-drug programmes. Forum 18 has also learned that it is planned to change the way religious communities represent their interests to local authorities, to the disadvantage of religious communities which are not Orthodox, Muslim or Buddhist.

Two of the more active Protestant communities in Kalmykia, the Lord's Love evangelical church and the Salvation Army, are now functioning without the foreign religious workers who helped build them up. Within the past few years, South Korean Paul Kim and Canadian Geoff Ryan have both been barred from entering Russia. Members of their two communities recently maintained to Forum 18 News Service that they now mainly experience no problems from the local authorities. However, they also pointed to a number of defamatory articles directed against them by the local state press.

Drawing on information gleaned in an exclusive interview with local FSB (former KGB) personnel, an Izvestiya Kalmykii journalist reported last December, in an article entitled "Incursion of Soul Hunters", that "western spies frequently operate within various missionary organisations, hiding behind lofty charitable ideals." During 2002, states the newspaper, seven personnel from missionary organisations representing the Salvation Army, Christian Missionary Alliance and Mission Aviation Fellowship were refused entry to Kalmykia. "Of course, they didn't agree with this decision and tried to overturn it in the courts, which just goes to show how greatly intelligence agencies are interested in their presence in Kalmykia."

"Every time we try and do something, they print a negative article," Pastor Vladimir Gololobov of the Lord's Love church told Forum 18 on 1 April. In July 2001 the church tried to counter accusations published by Izvestiya Kalmykii that its umbrella organisation, the Evangelical Christian Missionary Union, was a "sly and mobile enemy" engaged in espionage. While the newspaper did print extracts from the church's subsequent letter of complaint, it omitted key refutations.

"Incursion of Soul Hunters" also announced that "the avantgarde detachments of one of the most powerful totalitarian sects in the world, the Salvation Army, has reached us." It was after this article that members of the public began to write complaints about the Salvation Army to Kalmykia's public prosecutor, officer of the community's Elista Mission Command, Marika Safarova, told Forum 18 on 3 April. The Salvation Army was consequently prohibited from holding events for children, she said.

In other respects, the activity of the Salvation Army has been welcomed by the local authorities, with the local social services sending needy people whom they cannot help to the church, said Safarova. This is even while the Elista Mission Command does not yet have the registration required to carry out many of its activities. The Lord's Love Church, which is fully registered, also reports some support from the local authorities, with the municipal Department for Youth, Tourism and Sport recently enlisting the services of the church's musical group for an anti-drug campaign. The local official dealing with religious affairs, Mikhail Burninov, concurred that the Kalmyk authorities had no problem with Protestants when interviewed by Forum 18 News on 3 April. There are indications, however, of growing discontent with this state of affairs in some influential quarters. In a letter published in Izvestiya Kalmykii in response to the "Incursion of Soul Hunters" article, the leader of the Federation of Anarchists of Kalmykia complained that it had come too late, since the 13 Protestant organisations referred to were already legally registered in the republic. "If totalitarian religious sects are registered and carry out their extremist activity on a legal basis, how are we supposed to fight against them now?" he wrote. "Close them down? Just try it! A whole legion of human rights activists will appear!" In a follow-up article printed by the same newspaper, dean of Elista's Kazan Cathedral, Fr Anatoli Sklyarov, similarly complained that Russia's 1997 law had failed to change the religious situation, since "the adoption of a law which would really work did not take place due to western influence."

Imminent changes to the structure through which Kalmykia's religious communities represent their interests to the local authorities, however, may go some way to succeeding where the 1997 law failed. There are currently plans to form two local bodies concentrating on religious affairs, Mikhail Burninov told Forum 18. The first, the Interconfessional Council of Traditional Confessions, would include the three leaders of the Orthodox, Muslim and main Buddhist communities, he said, and was their initiative. The second body, the Council for Co-operation with Religious Associations, was the initiative of the authorities.

Both have the preliminary approval of President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, and Burninov acknowledged that it was as yet "an open question" whether it would be possible to include representatives of all registered religious organisations on the second. For example, local Orthodox bishop Zosima (Ostapenko) of Elista and Kalmykia might decline to participate if the Jehovah's Witnesses were represented, he said, and predicted that it would consequently take shape "at a much slower rate." The traditional confessions council, by contrast, would be functioning by the end of the month, he said. (END)

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