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RUSSIA: One religious policy fits all?

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

In both Sakhalin and Khabarovsk regions, Forum 18 News Service has observed that the local authorities attempt to translate the publicly expressed religious preferences of Russia's national leadership into concrete policy. Symbolic support for Russia's so-called traditional confessions - Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism - thus becomes material, even when these faiths have little or no traditional following in much of Far East Siberia. Local public opinion appears to be divided on the desirability of such an approach. Some believe state support for the Orthodox Church to be an essential part of the preservation of Russian national culture. One local Pentecostal, however, asked Forum 18: "Can you imagine - I, an evangelical Christian, or even an atheist, is working and paying taxes to build a new Orthodox church which is going to fight us?"

Russia's federal leaders usually demonstrate at least symbolic preference for the country's de facto "traditional" confessions – Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. When regional authorities follow suit, this preference often becomes practical policy, as Forum 18 News Service has observed in both Sakhalin and Khabarovsk regions.

Opening a 23 April conference hosted by Sakhalin regional administration on "The Role of Orthodoxy in the Revival of the Spiritual Identity of the Population in Russia's Far East Region", for example, the head of administration of President Vladimir Putin's representative in Russia's Far East District described the region as a border zone cut off from the spiritual centres of the nation, with many foreign-backed Protestant churches, new religious movements and active missionaries from the United States and South Korea. "In this situation, we need to take measures to support our traditional religions," declared Aleksandr Plotnikov, and referred to President Putin's personal approval of initiatives to boost patriotism.

While Plotnikov also said that state organs should not take confessional identity into account in their dealings with religious organisations, his initial sentiments set the tone for the rest of the conference. Bishop Daniil (Dorovskikh) of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and the Kuriles presented vice-governor and conference chairman Georgi Karlov with a distinguished patriarchal award, recalling that he had donated the first church candle kiosk at the construction site of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk's nine-year-old Cathedral of the Resurrection. Local deputy Tamara Potapenko noted that three Orthodox churches in Aleksandrovsk-Sakhalinsky, Nevelsk and the Kurile Islands had been built with support from the regional administration. Tamara Sadykova of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk's public relations department pointed out that the city authorities had donated municipal buildings to Orthodox communities, helped look for funds to renovate them and granted "almost all" the diocese's requests concerning Christmas and Easter celebrations. "But we could do more," she added.

Notably, while there were at least a hundred participants at this conference, the only other religious figure to address it was the leader of Sakhalin's tiny Muslim community, who is also a member of the regional administration's Council for Religious Affairs. The only other non-Orthodox religious representative on this Council is Sakhalin's Pentecostal bishop, Petr Yarmolyuk, who told Forum 18 that he had no idea that the conference was taking place. Nor did the other Protestant and Catholic representatives with whom Forum 18 spoke in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. (See also F18News 1 June

2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=331 , 7 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=335 and 16 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=342).

In Khabarovsk, Forum 18 found similar signs of local state support for the Russian Orthodox Church and token consideration of the other "traditional" confessions represented in the area. A vast Cathedral of the Transfiguration (a new Cathedral of the Dormition already stands at the end of the city's main street) is nearing completion by order of the customer service department of the region's Ministry of Construction, according to a billboard outside it. Khabarovsk governor Viktor Ishayev chairs the board of governors overseeing construction of the latest cathedral, according to regional religious affairs official Mikhail Svishchev. Speaking to Forum 18 on 29 April, he confirmed that a 20-metre Second World War memorial currently covered in scaffolding is being moved some 150 metres away from the centre of the square adjacent to the construction site because "it's out of place - it spoils the view of the cathedral." Svishchev also pointed out that the construction of a new Jewish complex in Khabarovsk city centre was being timed to coincide with the completion of the latest Orthodox cathedral.

Khabarovsk region's pro-Orthodox policy has been well documented in recent years. An October 1999 report in local newspaper

Priamurskiye Vedomosti describes how Bishop Mark (Tuzhikov) of Khabarovsk and Priamurye thanked Governor Ishayev for his initiative and support in the construction of an Orthodox church on the uninhabited island of Bolshoi Ussuriisk, which lies in the River Amur between Khabarovsk city and the Chinese border. According to the newspaper, Ishayev in turn emphasised that the consecration of an Orthodox church on the island was "the most powerful reinforcement of the fact that this is truly and eternally Russian soil." In January 2000 another local newspaper, Tikhookeanskaya Zvezda, reported that a Khabarovsk Orthodox priest had been decorated with a state award "for outstanding work" in the border guard service. His activities reportedly included preaching to border guards about the "sacred Russian tradition" of defending the homeland as well as blessing office quarters, border posts, weaponry and two border patrol ships. (See also F18News 1 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=332, 7 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=336 and 16 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=343).

Notwithstanding such policy, however, Forum 18 found little or no trace of a tradition of any of the four "traditional" faiths in Sakhalin and Khabarovsk regions. A prison after it first came under Russian rule in the late 1860s, Sakhalin island had ten Orthodox priests and approximately 20 chapels within the prison system, according to local university historian Natalya Potapova. As the generally non-religious convict population did not have full citizens' rights, these were not parishes, she said, and they were all closed during the two decades following the Bolshevik revolution. During the Soviet period, the region had no Orthodox churches at all, Potapova told Forum 18, and the only religious community to be granted state registration prior to the 1980s – if only for a 15-year period – were the Baptists. An Orthodox society with several hundred members was not permitted to register until 1989, she said, in which year the oldest worship building on the island was built – a Baptist prayer house.

Currently, there are 136 registered religious organisations in Sakhalin region, of which 46 are Orthodox. Judging by estimates given to Forum 18 by a variety of sources, however, regular worshippers in the region (population 710,000) number approximately 2,000 Orthodox, 8,600 Protestants, 800 Jehovah's Witnesses and 200 Catholics. While the Protestant majority appears striking, the results of a 2004 month-long sociological survey into religious attitudes presented at the 23 April conference by Aleksandr Konkov of Sakhalin State University astonished even local Protestants and Catholics with whom Forum 18 spoke. Whereas in Russia as a whole at least 60 per cent of respondents usually define themselves as Orthodox in such polls, the analogous figure in Sakhalin region turned out to be 42 per cent, while 7.8 and 2 per cent respectively said that they were Protestant or Catholic (in Russia as a whole, the combined figure is usually around one per cent).

In Khabarovsk region, there are currently 160 registered religious organisations, of which 44 are Orthodox. However, Khabarovsk regional religious affairs official Mikhail Svishech pointed out to Forum 18 that he keeps track of a further 190 unregistered religious groups, and the official statistics of recent years which reflect this fact indicate that three-quarters of all religious associations in the region are Protestant. Like Sakhalin, Khabarovsk region came under firm Russian control only in the late 1850s, served as the final destination for many sentenced to exile and suffered a ruthless atheist policy during the Soviet period, with only a handful of Orthodox parishes open by the mid-1980s.

Mikhail Svishech maintained to Forum 18 that it was precisely because the state had destroyed Orthodox churches in the Soviet period that it should now take responsibility for their reconstruction. He insisted, however, that no state funds had gone towards Khabarovsk's new cathedrals - "although it isn't prohibited" – and that the Transfiguration Cathedral had funded by exclusively private companies and a donation of half a million dollars from Patriarch Aleksii II. On 30 April, local Orthodox parish priest Fr Nikanor (Lepeshev) confirmed to Forum 18 that the cathedrals had been primarily financed by local sponsors.

On the same day, Pavel Belykh of local Orthodox youth group Grad Kitezh spoke in favour of religious policy in Khabarovsk. He remarked to Forum 18 that his mother, while a non-believer, understood why Orthodox churches were currently being built in the city. "She says that if we don't build them, there will be ten Kingdom Halls and ten Krishna cafes, and Russian children will turn against their families and history." Other young residents of Far East Russia hold different – but equally strongly held – opinions, however. One source told Forum 18 that young Catholic parishioners in Khabarovsk are particularly upset by the move of the Second World War memorial, as "their grandparents' names are on it." In a 2003 message to Forum 18, a young member of Victory Chapel independent Pentecostal church contrasted Sakhalin authorities' opposition to his congregation (see F18News 18 March 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=8 and 1 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=331) with their support for the Orthodox diocese. "Can you imagine - I, an evangelical Christian, or even an atheist, is working and paying taxes to build a new Orthodox church which is going to fight us?"

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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