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RUSSIA: Growing restrictions on rental by Protestants

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

Russian law does not prevent religious communities from renting premises for worship, but Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service that in recent months they are increasingly barred from doing so. Most Protestant communities in Russia do not have their own church buildings and so have to rent buildings for worship, the majority of which are state-owned. Examples of this problem known to Forum 18 come from many parts of the Russian Federation. Anatoli Pchelintsev and Sergei Sychev, two Moscow-based lawyers specialising in religious believers' rights, have suggested to Forum 18 that possible reasons include state administrators not informing the federal authorities of official leases, so avoiding the need to give reasons for refusing to lease, and stepped-up pressure by the Moscow Patriarchate on local authorities and cultural institutions not to lease buildings to Protestants.

While there is nothing in Russian law to prevent religious communities from renting premises for worship, Protestant representatives have told Forum 18 News Service that in recent months they are increasingly barred from doing so. Most Protestant communities in Russia do not have their own church buildings and are obliged to rent premises for worship, the majority of which are still state-controlled.

The 100-strong Glorification Church in the Tuvan capital Kyzyl (bordering Mongolia), for example, was forced to change its rented premises eight or nine times from 2002 to 2004, its pastor Dmitri Ryabov told Forum 18 in July at the small house subsequently purchased by the community. Having previously rented for three years without incident, the church began to be told by directors of different premises that they would like to lease to the congregation but were unable, said Ryabov, "they didn't explain why."

In the Volga city of Saratov, the 700-strong Word of Life Church also has its own premises, but has had rental agreements for Christian projects cancelled five times over the past two years, US church worker Todd Roese told Forum 18 at the church in June. This figure would be much higher if it included refusals made to its 70-strong sister congregation in Saratov's satellite town of Engels, he added, now forced to meet in private homes after being rejected by every possible venue in the town. The situation is even more acute in other of Saratov region's small towns, said Roese, where the church might typically try to consolidate new congregations of approximately ten people by holding meetings at rented accommodation every few months: "You have a project to show a Christian film and you make arrangements with a private theatre, say, you advertise and then the mayor might tell the theatre director that if he wants to keep his job he should make sure that the project doesn't take place."

Forum 18 has previously reported similar problems faced by Protestant communities in disparate parts of Russia, including Krasnodar region (see F18News 7 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=470) and the Urals (see F18News 2 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=383 and 9 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=389).

The situation appears to be little better in Moscow. The Russian capital's 1000-strong Emmanuel Pentecostal Church - several of whose representatives were recently briefly imprisoned for staging what the city authorities claim was an unauthorised demonstration highlighting state obstruction to its construction plans (see F18News 13 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=583) - is now onto its fifth or sixth rented venue in the city, church administrator Bakur Azaryan told Forum 18 in June: "If we are thrown out, we won't get another place." Refusals are given for different reasons, he said, "that the venue is closed, for example, or under repair - when it isn't - or that senior administration just won't allow it." In Nazaryevo and Pushkino (Moscow region), sister Assemblies of God congregations are obliged to meet in private homes as no local venues will lease to them, he added.

In August, Pastor Maksim Myasnitsov told Forum 18 that his small Moscow congregation merged with a much larger evangelical church renting commercial property after a senior district official told a palace of culture director to terminate his unofficial rental agreement with them in early 2004. Myasnitsov tried to make alternative arrangements with three other local venues but was refused, he said: "Each time they said it was because we are not Orthodox - if you are not Orthodox, you are a sect."

A 200-strong evangelical congregation whose pastor preferred not to be identified for fear of losing its current premises has told Forum 18 that in late 2004 the church was suddenly asked to move from the Moscow venue which it had officially rented for many years. "I know the FSB security service and a high-ranking official asked many times why we were able to rent there," he said. "This

sort of thing happens everywhere in Russia. At many places, as soon as they find out that they would be rented for a Protestant service, they simply say that it is not allowed. It is an unwritten rule – they don't quote any part of the law."

Speaking to Forum 18 in recent months, Anatoli Pchelintsev and Sergei Sychev, two Moscow-based lawyers specialising in religious believers' rights, both agreed that problems renting premises for worship are getting much more frequent - and that they are not connected with any law. Contrary to October 2004 media reports of official proposals to bar religious organisations from renting cultural and sports institutions, consultant to Russia's parliamentary religion committee Stepan Medvedko has also told Forum 18 that these "could not possibly have been adopted" but had to be formally considered as part of the committee's routine procedure (see Forum 18 religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509).

While evidently not requiring any legal basis, Sychev suggested to Forum 18 that rental restrictions might be linked by analogy to the Russian Ministry of Education's July 2000 circular letter warning against "penetration by non-traditional religious organisations into educational institutions." He also explained why there can be no redress for religious organisations refused legitimate access: "Usually the premises are state property and their administrators are supposed to inform the federal authorities when they lease them officially. As they don't do this, they don't need to give any reasons for refusing to lease."

Anatoli Pchelintsev suggested to Forum 18 in April that the increased frequency of rental restrictions was the result of stepped-up pressure by the Moscow Patriarchate on local authorities and cultural institutions not to lease to Protestants. In July, Portal-Credo Russian religious affairs website published a circular letter dated 7 February 2005 from Orthodox Archbishop German (Moralin) of Kursk and Rylsk addressed to all deaneries in his diocese, ordering the quarterly submission of information on the activity of "sects" on their territory, including their rate of growth, where they meet and the details of their "sympathisers" in local positions of authority, such as mayors or heads of administration.

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

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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