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RUSSIA: "Absurd" property regulations extend to Catholics and Orthodox

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

Catholic and Orthodox communities are reporting the same inordinate level of state interest in the technical aspects of worship buildings which has mainly been experienced up to now by Protestants, Forum 18 News Service has found. For example, claiming that it is an "unlawful construction", the authorities in Kaliningrad are calling for the demolition of a Catholic priest's house – although Fr Anupras Gauronskas has told Forum 18 that "there's nothing to take down!" Russian Orthodox communities also complain of apparently over-zealous authorities. One example is that fire safety officials in Komi have taken issue with a "wooden partition" – the iconostasis - in a village church, and made what the local diocesan secretary Fr Filip (Filippov) calls "absurd demands". These include the installation of a fire alarm system which is activated by candles and incense during services. Such demands are still most commonly reported by Protestants, and if deadlines are given – as in the case of a mosque in Astrakhan - such situations normally drag on beyond deadlines.

An apparently inordinate level of state interest in the fire safety and other technical aspects of worship buildings, so far experienced mainly by Protestant communities, is also beginning to be reported by some Catholic and Russian Orthodox communities, Forum 18 News Service has found.

Claiming that it qualifies as "unlawful construction", for example, the authorities in the Baltic Sea enclave city of Kaliningrad are calling for the demolition of a priest's house belonging to the Roman Catholic parish of the Holy Family. "It's nothing drastic," Dmitri Burko, who as Public Prosecutor of Kaliningrad's Leningrad District filed suit for the building's removal, insisted to Forum 18 on 12 March. While the parish does have some documents authorising construction of the priest's house, he explained, it does not have all those required under Russian law, particularly a final document giving overall permission to build. Currently "almost complete according to our data", Burko maintained that the priest's house could still be given this document if it passed inspections by various state departments.

"It's all a misunderstanding - there's nothing to take down!" Fr Anupras Gauronskas of Holy Family Parish remarked to Forum 18 on 9 March. While the Catholic parish does intend to build a priest's house on the site of the alleged unlawful construction, he explained, "there's only earth there right now." According to Fr Gauronskas, the plot is owned by the parish and located next to the site of its worship building, which is also church property. Parishioners are currently still gathering documentation for permission to start construction of the priest's house, he told Forum 18, "but somehow we ended up on a list of unlawful buildings."

Apparently over-zealous demands by some government inspectorates are also beginning to be reported by communities of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). In the northern European republic of Komi, fire safety officers have taken issue with a "wooden partition" – the iconostasis - in a village church, according to local diocesan secretary Fr Filip (Filippov). In a 28 February report on Komi Online news website, Fr Filip cited other "absurd demands" by regional fire safety officials, such as the installation of a hypersensitive modern fire alarm system – which is activated by candles and incense during services - the enclosure in metal of hanging icon lamps, the laying of a concrete path to a church - "immediately, right in the middle of winter!" - and the use of openwork grilles over church windows – even though police officers insist on closed grilles to thwart thieves.

The secretary of Syktyvkar and Vorkuta Orthodox diocese added that he intends to appeal against a 10,000 Rouble (2,350 Norwegian Kroner, 290 Euros or 380 US Dollars) fine for alleged fire safety violations in his own Kazan Icon of the Mother of God Church, as he maintains that these were rectified long ago.

Also responding to Komi Online, Anatoli Shevchuk, the head of Syktyvkar's state fire inspectorate, acknowledged that it was possible that young inspectors might sometimes make absurd demands. He insisted that "disputed issues can always be discussed - we are ready to co-operate," however, and maintained that Orthodox priests are not usually forthcoming with complaints.

Abbess of Novodevichy Orthodox Women's Monastery in St Petersburg, Mother Sofiya (Silina) complained on 20 October 2006 that a recent fire safety check-up resulting in an order to close her convent was unlawfully conducted in her absence. "I found out that they were trying to close the monastery from parishioners who had read about it in the newspapers!" she told local journalists.

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On 2 November, however, the head of St Petersburg's Emergency Ministry department, Leonid Belyayev, announced that the women's monastery would not be closed after all. As reported by Russia's Regnum News Agency, he pointed out that the company carrying out renovation work on the complex's Resurrection Cathedral – rather than the convent itself – had instead been fined 10,000 Roubles (2,350 Norwegian Kroner, 290 Euros or 380 US Dollars) for breaching fire safety regulations. Belyayev also apologised for the "harm to the convent's image" caused by his department's original allegation that it was responsible for the violations.

Such demands are still more commonly reported by Protestant communities, however. On 7 December 2006 Khakassia Arbitration Court ordered Glorification Pentecostal Church in the Siberian republic's main city, Abakan, to demolish its church building and vacate the plot of land beneath it by 1 April 2007 due to alleged fire safety and sanitation violations (see F18News 8 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=908). At an 8 February hearing to consider the church's appeal against this ruling, the same court ordered that its case be re-examined, starting on 1 March.

On 6 March, Glorification's assistant pastor and administrator Aleksandr Prus told Forum 18 that the 1 March hearing had concluded with a call for an expert analysis to check the building's safety. "We're confident the investigation will be objective," he remarked, explaining that the procedure is to be conducted by a private company from another town, although a date has not yet been set. Prus confirmed that his congregation is currently able to use its building.

In a separate case, Khakassia Arbitration Court has begun consideration of a demand by the republic's Education Ministry to close Glorification's adjacent private secondary school, also due to alleged fire safety violations (see F18News 8 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=908). According to Prus, a 9 March hearing was adjourned until 16 March to allow the court time to consider relevant documentation. To the church's surprise, he added, Khakassia's senior religious affairs official, Nikolai Volkov, defended the school at the 9 March hearing, arguing that the authorities "could not simply take an institution and close it down in this way."

Volkov assured Forum 18 on 13 March that the problems surrounding Glorification's church building would be "sorted out quietly and peacefully." He confirmed that he told Khakassia Arbitration Court at the 9 May hearing that "the school should function" and stressed to Forum 18 that – as long as it was in line with the law - he believed it should receive a new educational licence after its present one expires.

Following a threat by the regional authorities in Lipetsk to close down a Baptist prayer house if it is not approved fit for use [sdano v ekspluatatsiyu] by 22 February (see F18News 22 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=917), the church's pastor Vladimir Boyev told Forum 18 on 6 March that this deadline has been postponed to 19 March.

Similar situations - such as the threatened demolition of Mosque No. 34 in the southern city of Astrakhan - have tended to drag on beyond deadlines (see most recently F18News 8 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=908).

Usually, as with Catholic parishes in Rostov-on-Don and Sochi on the Black Sea, refusal to recognise de facto complete houses of worship as fit for use does not result in such extreme threats as closure or demolition. It does allow the state to exert pressure on religious organisations in the form of constant check-ups and fines, however (see F18News 18 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=783). Forum 18 has also noted a tendency for the Federal Registration Service to make petty complaints regarding some religious organisations (see F18News 18 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=609). There is concern that this will increase following the implementation in April 2007 of those parts of the so-called NGO Law that affect religious organisations (see F18News 14 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=869). (END)

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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