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RUSSIA: Are Sakha Protestants' concerns "baseless and contrived"?

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

A Russian Christian musical festival in the Siberian republic of Sakha (Yakutia) had to abruptly move from Yakutia State University after a contract was cancelled, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The university's Prorektor stated that this was due to a telephone call "from above." This is the latest of a series of disputes between local Protestant organisations and the local authorities. One official, Afanasy Nikolayev, claimed that disputes were caused by some religious organisations "pursuing a policy in the republic aimed at dividing the population along religious lines (..) in practice they are realising the directive given by Adolf Hitler in his time (..) to encourage any form of disunity and facilitate the appearance of the most varied kinds of religious sects in every little village." Following earlier Protestant concern at the high degree of state involvement in what was described as a Russian Orthodox conference, at which delegates questioned Russian constitutional rights, another official described Protestant concerns as "baseless and contrived" and wrote that "by your tactless actions you violate the right and freedom of believers of other confessions."

Christian performers of khomus [mouth harp] music and osokhai choral singing in the Siberian republic of Sakha (Yakutia) were "insulted" by what they perceive as state disruption to their first Christian traditional music festival, Forum 18 News Service has learnt.

Valentin Nikonenko of the Association of Evangelical Churches in Yakutia, which organised the event, told Forum 18 on 3 April that his organisation's contract to use the Cultural Centre of Yakutia State University was abruptly cancelled some 48 hours before it was due to begin on 18 March. As many of the 200 participants and guests had already travelled hundreds of kilometres to the republican capital Yakutsk, the Association was forced to transfer the festival to church premises designed for a maximum of 120 people. Five of the Association's 24 registered member churches are Sakha-speaking, as are all of its 25 unregistered groups in the republic.

According to Nikonenko, the prorektor of Yakutia State University, Vasily Vasilyev, explained to the Association on 17 March that the 22 February contract to stage the music festival had been cancelled due to a telephone call "from above", but declined to reveal its source or to provide written confirmation.

The cancellation is the latest incident in a series of recent stand-offs between Sakha's regional Protestant organisations – particularly the Association – and the local authorities. Explaining the essence of the conflict in a 14 December 2006 interview, Afanasy Nikolayev, who heads the Section for Work with Social and Religious Associations within Sakha's Nationalities and Federative Relations Department, told V-Yakutia.ru local news website that some religious organisations, "are pursuing a policy in the republic aimed at dividing the population along religious lines (..) in practice they are realising the directive given by Adolf Hitler in his time (..) to encourage any form of disunity and facilitate the appearance of the most varied kinds of religious sects in every little village."

Nikolayev also maintained that these religious organisations "use any occasion to attract the attention of western countries under the guise of defending their rights to freedom of conscience and religious belief (..) in this way they raise the funds which foreign states invest in them." While formally registered as Russian religious organisations, he maintained, "they in practice serve the interests of western countries, whose aim is the break-up of Russia into a series of states dependent upon them and oriented towards western values."

Founded in 1990 and registered by the Sakha authorities as a regional centralised religious organisation in 2001, Valentin Nikonenko told Forum 18 that the Association of Evangelical Churches in Yakutia was in fact formed by missionaries from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. It does not have any affiliations outside Sakha.

Afanasy Nikolayev's comments followed a 5 December 2006 pre-arranged check-up by the Federal Registration Service, in which Nikolai Ignatyev of Sakha's local FSB security service and Innokenty Prokopyev of the Nationalities and Federative Relations Department reportedly tried to participate. Since they were not listed among the state officials assigned to conduct the check-up – who were already on the Association's premises when the pair appeared – the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice argued on 6 December that their actions were unlawful.

Nikolayev insisted, in his 14 December interview with V-Yakutia.ru., that his Nationalities and Federative Relations Department had every right to check up on the Association, "We have an agreement with the Federal Registration Service and we conduct check-ups of religious associations together on the basis of such contracts," he maintained.

Representatives of Sakha's Nationalities and Federative Relations Department similarly dismissed a formal complaint by local Protestant leaders about a recent Yakutsk conference devoted to "The Foundations of Spiritual Security in the Far East Region". Held at the Department's premises from 24-26 October 2006, the concluding resolution of the conference notes "the activation of cultural-religious expansion of foreign states in the Far East of the Russian Federation." It also calls for legislative measures to limit "the destructive activities of totalitarian sects," including the introduction of federal laws on traditional religious organisations and missionary activity, and a new government policy on relations with religious organisations. The identity of "totalitarian sects" was not given.

The leaders of four evangelical, Adventist and Pentecostal associations in Sakha expressed their disquiet about the conference to the republic's president, Vyacheslav Shtyrov, in a 31 October 2006 letter. Present at the event, the four wrote of their concern about the high degree of state involvement in what had been billed as a Russian Orthodox conference, especially as no representatives of other religious confessions were invited. Remarking that the term "spiritual security" is used in a politicised sense in the conference's title, they also complained about delegates' questioning of constitutional norms at the event, such as the presence of children at religious meetings and foreign missionaries operating in accordance with Russian law.

The Protestants' concerns are "baseless and contrived," claimed Afanasy Migalkin, head of Sakha's Nationalities and Federative Relations Department, in a 27 November reply. Migalkin also stated that interference by religious associations in the activity of representatives of state departments is inadmissible. "The participation of your [Protestant] representatives in events conducted by other confessions without official invitation or approval also appears improper," he writes. "By your tactless actions you violate the right and freedom of believers of other confessions."

Nikolayev of the Nationalities and Federative Relations Department also claimed, in his 14 December interview, that the conference was the initiative of the local Russian Orthodox diocese of Yakutsk and Lena and supported by the Nationalities and Federative Relations Department. "That is, it was a church conference (...) the participation of delegates from other confessions, even Christian ones, was not proposed." In Nikolayev's view, the four Protestant leaders "made a point of coming uninvited to someone else's event in order to gather compromising material and then create a scandal."

However, Russian Orthodox Bishop Zosima of Yakutsk and Lena states that the conference was not organised by the Orthodox Church, but by the Nationalities and Federative Relations Department. In a 3 February interview with Yakutia Newspaper, founded by the Sakha regional administration, he stated that "I asked the patriarch's blessing whether or not to participate. While we did not invite anyone from other religious associations to the conference, knowing that various subjective points of view would be expressed, we did not forbid anyone from attending." He suggests that "the conference resolution is not aggressive, but we did emphasise in it the need to limit the behaviour of destructive cults, because they destroy the human person." Bishop Zosima also remarks that, "the majority of accusations aimed at us are based on statements by individual officials – but in that case the issue should be about their competence. If someone works in a certain post, it does not mean that he knows everything, especially in a complicated area like religion."

The circumstances of the conference are similar to one attended by Forum 18 on the Pacific island of Sakhalin in 2004 (see F18News 16 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=342 and 22 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=346).

Afanasy Nikolayev publicly expressed condemnation of Protestant activity in the republic almost a year ago. In a May 2006 interview with Yakutia Newspaper he maintained that the appearance of non-Orthodox churches in Sakha is connected with "attempts by a number of foreign states, first and foremost the USA, to strengthen their position in Russia and weaken our country, to divide it along religious lines by creating a type of 'fifth column' made up of non-traditional religious organisations of Protestants, Catholics and new religious movements." The newspaper listed various "destructive sects", including five Pentecostal churches, and calls upon readers to inform the Nationalities and Federative Relations Department should they encounter their activity.

Separately, the V-Yakutia.ru website has speculated that the more recent developments are linked with recent elections in Sakha.

Nikolayev's concerns echo a February 2000 letter from two representatives of the Russian Academy for State Service warning the State Committee for Northern Affairs that "a religious invasion by huge numbers of American Protestant preachers" forms a significant part of a carefully planned system of measures by the USA to wrest the region of Chukotka – which borders Alaska – away from the Russian Federation.

More recently, however, concern about the loss of East Siberian territory to other nations – with state approval – has come from a different source. In December 2004 seven Orthodox bishops whose dioceses lie in the Russian Far East wrote an open letter to President Vladimir Putin protesting the possible transfer of the southern Kurile Islands to Japan. They also criticised the 14 October

2004 agreement according to which Russia granted China possession of Tarabarov Island and approximately 50 per cent of Bolshoi Ussuriisk Island – both situated in the Amur River alongside the Russian city of Khabarovsk.

If the whole of Bolshoi Ussuriisk island had been given to China, the border would come right up to Khabarovsk, Archbishop Mark (Tuzhikov) of Khabarovsk and Primaurye pointed out in a February 2007 interview with the Pravoslavie.ru Orthodox website. "Thank God, the decision was taken in 2000 to build a chapel on Bolshoi Ussuriisk Island dedicated to St Viktor the Warrior," he remarked. "Nevertheless, due to an oversight by our Foreign Ministry, they drew the border right in front of the church porch." Currently, added the archbishop, efforts are being made "to get the barbed wire moved away from the chapel doors, at least by about five metres." (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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