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RUSSIA: Spring offensive against the "Vitaliban"?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad within Russia less enthusiastic about a proposed merger with the Moscow Patriarchate have faced obstruction from the state authorities, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. When 50 clergy and lay members held a diocesan assembly in Tula region in February, officers of the police and FSB (former KGB) questioned their legal right to meet, while elsewhere local authorities have failed to register parishes, obstruct those that meet in privately-owned buildings and even threatened to confiscate churches built with parishioners' funds. Without state registration, parishes cannot produce publications or conduct missionary activity, but some clergy argue it is better not to have registration. "It is easier for state officials to apply pressure to a community with legal status by finding fault with its documentation," one priest told Forum 18.

Following the late 2001 schism in the US-based Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA), Forum 18 News Service has learnt that parishes within Russia which continue to recognise the authority of its former leader, Metropolitan Vitali (Ustinov), are encountering greater pressure from the secular authorities than those acknowledging the hierarch who replaced him, Metropolitan Lavr (Shkurla). Clergy have told Forum 18 that officials questioned their right to hold a diocesan assembly in Tula region in February, have faced difficulties registering parishes, obstruction to meeting in churches built in the name of private individuals and threats to confiscate such churches.

The ROCA was formed as a temporary church administration in the early 1920s by exiled bishops cut off from their Patriarchate in the Soviet Union, which by then was heavily influenced by the new atheist regime. Under Metropolitan Lavr, the ROCA has become engaged in a process of reconciliation with the Moscow Patriarchate which has been publicly supported by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Metropolitan Vitali's faction remains vehemently opposed to such rapprochement.

From 6-8 February, some 50 clergy and lay representatives of ROCA parishes within Russia still recognising Metropolitan Vitali as their leading hierarch (usually referred to by the abbreviation ROCA (V), also nicknamed "Vitaliban") held a diocesan assembly at one of their parish churches, the Church of the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God in the town of Aleksin, Tula region. Just before the group was about to hold an evening service on the second day of the gathering, according to the church's Moscow-based parish priest Fr Tikhon (Kozushin), a party consisting of two local officials, two officers of the FSB (former KGB) and two armed police arrived to check the identification papers of all present. Speaking to Forum 18 on 31 March, Fr Tikhon said that the state representatives warned those at the diocesan assembly that they did not have the necessary legal documentation to meet in the building, while one of the FSB officers asked warily how much money the church received from New York.

The Aleksin parish's church building, the wing of a former country house, was transferred to the community in 1991 without windows, roof and one wall, Fr Tikhon told Forum 18. "We weren't even given nails, whereas the authorities have built up Moscow Patriarchate churches from scratch." Initially registered in that year, he said, the parish has still not been re-registered under the 1997 religion law, even though it submitted an application in December 2000. "The authorities keep asking for confirmation of a legal address, but we don't have the legal documents to our building," said Fr Tikhon, "because they refuse to give them to us." In another way, however, this state of affairs assists the parish, he pointed out. "If we had the legal documents to the building, they would find the tiniest irregularity in them and take us to court." Without legal personality status, the parish thus cannot be evicted from the building, Fr Tikhon explained. In 2003, the local authorities filed suit to evict him personally, he added, "but they cannot prove that I am registered there".

Speaking to Forum 18 on 20 April, a public relations official at Aleksin municipal administration maintained that the ROCA parish in the city had had registration at one time but had not re-registered under the 1997 religion law. Galina Mekalina added that she thought that the community had submitted a registration application and was using a property in the city, but she directed Forum 18 to the municipal official dealing with property for confirmation of the latter point. Somewhat hostile, Aleksin's property official, Pyotr Gus, refused to state whether the ROCA parish had use of a municipal property in the city, whether legally or illegally: "What do you want to know for?" He maintained that the community had never had state registration - "I can't give a building to an unregistered organisation" - and that the property issue would be resolved in relation to the parish once a decision was made regarding its legal status. In general, he remarked, the situation in Aleksin was as in other Russian cities, "we have groups belonging to many different confessions but the main ones are our Orthodox".

Fr Tikhon (Kozushin) told Forum 18 that, after a number of blocked attempts by ROCA parishes in Russia to claim historical church buildings in the early 1990s, "that road is now completely closed". Back in 1991, he said, the Moscow municipal authorities swiftly transferred such a building to a Moscow Patriarchate parish once his community in the Russian capital formally requested it, and Moscow City Council then passed a resolution in the same year permitting Orthodox church property to be transferred only to the Moscow Patriarchate. The existence of this latter decision was confirmed to Forum 18 on 26 March by the press secretary of Moscow City's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, Konstantin Blazhenov (see F18News 29 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=290).

Consequently, Fr Tikhon told Forum 18, ROCA parishes have sought to build churches as the private property of one of their members. In the far north-eastern European Russian republic of Komi, the state authorities tried to confiscate the wooden church of a ROCA (now ROCA (V)) monastery and its parishioners, even though the building is the private property of one of the community (see F18News 24 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=111) Speaking to Forum 18 on 14 April 2004 from Krasnodar region, one of two ROCA (V) bishops in Russia said that he encountered similar obstruction. According to Bishop Viktor (Pivovarov) of Slavyansk and Southern Russia (temporarily also of Northern Russia), the municipal authorities in Slavyansk-on-Kuban rejected his parish's application to build a church, even though it has state registration. Consequently, he said, he began construction of a church as his own private property in 2002. "After that the city administration argued that I was not legally supposed to use it before it was finished," he told Forum 18. "But I said that I would mobilise hundreds of parishioners in defence of the building if they tried to close us down."

On 20 April a spokesman at the department for the affairs of religious organisations within the administration of Krasnodar region told Forum 18 that the official whose brief included the ROCA parish was currently away, and that Forum 18's question lay outside his own area of expertise.

Fr Tikhon (Kozushin) told Forum 18 that ROCA communities more usually meet in flats. When the 70-strong ROCA (V) parish in Kursk now gathers for worship at a private home, there is barely enough room, its priest, Fr Vyacheslav Lebedev, told Forum 18 on 13 April. The community has never chosen to register, believing lack of registration to have particular advantages, he explained: "It is easier for state officials to apply pressure to a community with legal status by finding fault with its documentation." On the other hand, Fr Vyacheslav acknowledged that an unregistered religious group is subject to certain restrictions under the 1997 religion law: "We can't publish or conduct organised missionary activity."

By contrast, Russian representatives of the ROCA under Metropolitan Lavr (Shkurla) (usually referred to as ROCA (L)) now maintain that they have good or improved relations with the state authorities. On 1 March the New York synod's official representative in Russia, Bishop Mikhail (Donskov) of Boston, told Forum 18 at his residence in Podolsk (just south of Moscow), that he had always had good relations with the Russian secular authorities. Declining to state the number of parishes in his care in European Russia (Forum 18 loosely estimates that the ROCA (V) has 50 and the ROCA (L) 25 communities nation-wide), Bishop Mikhail dismissed previously documented difficulties encountered by the ROCA in Russia, such as in registering some parishes and a European diocese or obtaining use of historical church property. A French citizen, "no administrator or religious affairs official has ever offended me" since he first visited post-Soviet Russia as ROCA representative in 1993, Bishop Mikhail told Forum 18. Any difficulties which may have occurred in the past were due to "mistakes" by both ROCA church members in Russia who did not understand legal procedures and state officials who were not issued proper instructions about how to act, he maintained.

Registered in 1999, the only ROCA (L) diocese in Russia is led by Bishop Yevtikhi (Kurochkin) of Ishim and Siberia. Speaking to Forum 18 on 14 April, Bishop Yevtikhi commented that he had noticed a positive change in his relations with the local regional authorities in Tyumen since the New York synod had embarked upon dialogue with the Moscow Patriarchate. "They have begun to be attentive and courteous towards us - this year they sent me Easter greetings for the first time ever, for example," he remarked.

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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