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RUSSIA: State interrogations of Komi breakaway Orthodox

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

State interrogations of members of the breakaway Orthodox community at Komi and those associated with them are claimed to have continued, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, including attempts to intimidate teenage school children, as well as municipal employees, who attend services at the monastery. This has taken place even after an apparently conclusive court ruling in the monastery's favour.

Even after an October 2002 court ruling in their favour (See previous F18News article), pressure on the Votcha-based Russian Orthodox Church Abroad community continues. Olga Kuznetsova, the lawyer of Yuri Yekishev (main defendant in the case for ownership of the community's wooden church) is also an employee in the mayor's office of the Komi capital, Syktyvkar. On 26 October 2002 local newspaper "Stefanovsky Bulvar" claimed that the Komi public prosecutor tried to find her "guilty of violating labour law" soon after Yekishev's victory in the final court case. According to Fr Stefan (Babayev), abbot of the breakaway Votcha monastery, a municipal architect who appeared as a defence witness for the community has since been threatened with dismissal.

Interviewed by Forum 18 on 7 July, Babayev said he had been interrogated by state authorities on ten occasions from spring 1999 to March 2003. In seven of these, he said, Sysola district police accused him of: stealing donations given to the local Patriarchate diocese of Syktyvkar and Vorkuta; burning down the former school in Votcha which the monastic community occupied before joining the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad; stealing the remains after the alleged arson attempt; and vandalising a wooden cross erected on the site by the Patriarchate diocese. Two interrogations each lasted four hours and were said to be conducted in a rough manner by an official of the Komi republic's public prosecutor. These consisted mainly of accusations of economic and organised crime. The tenth was conducted by the republic's tax police. Officials have not formally drawn up a case against Babayev.

"Now our children are being interrogated," wrote 85 Votcha parishioners in an open letter to the head of Komi republic, Vladimir Torlopov, published in local newspaper "Mayak Sysoly" on 12 November 2002. Anton Kamyshov (aged 16), Irina Sergeev (17), Natalya Klyapyshev (17) and Sofiya Kamyshova (17) were interrogated by four officials from the republic's public prosecutor "in Pervomaisky village school," state villagers. In an interview on 10 July, one of the pupils, Sofiya Kamyshova, said she was summoned from a literature lesson to the head teacher's study and asked whether she went to church voluntarily, or whether the priests forced her to go. "It was unpleasant, although not frightening," she told Forum 18. "They tried to get us to fill out documents, but we understood that it was a crooked business and refused." In her view, officials wanted to construct a case against Fr Stefan (Babayev) and had selected the four pupils because they had showed support for the monks by attending the recent court case concerning Votcha's wooden church. According to Babayev, 24 local school pupils attend services at least occasionally.

In a reply to the Votcha villagers published by local newspaper "Molodezh Severa," Komi public prosecutor Viktor Kovalevsky cites two official requests his office received from Syktyvkar and Vorkuta diocese. The first was to examine the legality of the land allocation for the construction of the wooden church in Votcha, which culminated in the 2002 court case against Yekishev. The second was to examine alleged "collaboration" between Pervomaisky school and Votcha's Russian Orthodox Church Abroad community, but no case was found since "the participation by children in worship services is not prohibited by current legislation." Not mentioning the interrogation at the school, Kovalevsky concluded that the public prosecutor is required by law to respond to requests received from Komi citizens, including those representing the Patriarchate diocese.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 22 July, the senior assistant to Komi public prosecutor initially described the dispute between the Patriarchate diocese and the breakaway community in Votcha as an "internal church affair." Igor Voityuk then acknowledged that procuracy officials had investigated once a question of minors being coerced into church attendance had arisen, but that no case had been established. Forum 18 asked if procuracy officials were examining or intended to examine claims of alleged illegal activity by the local Patriarchate diocese, as well as complaints against Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and Baptist (see F18News 23 July 2003) communities. Voityuk said that his office had received no information about such claims, but if they received complaints from Komi citizens about crimes "we will intervene" whatever the identity of the alleged perpetrators. He surmised that, since he had not heard of the elderly parishioner's written complaint about the monastery in Vazhkurye, it must have "remained at the level of the head of the republic."

In an interview with Forum 18 News Service on 8 July, the adviser on religious issues to the assistant head of Komi republic, Galina

Gabusheva, also maintained that the public prosecutor officials had questioned both the pupils and Fr Stefan (Babayev) in response to claims from Moscow Patriarchate Bishop Pitirim (Volochnikov) of Syktyvkar and Vorkuta, which they were legally obliged to pursue.

On 8 July Forum 18 spoke to diocesan secretary Fr Filip (Filippov) and requested an interview with either Bishop Pitirim or himself on either 9 or 10 July. Calling back as requested on the morning of 10 July, Forum 18 was informed that Fr Filip had not yet arrived at the diocesan offices. Calling in person at 1pm, a secretary told Forum 18 that both bishop and Fr Filip apologised that an interview would no longer be possible, since they had both had to leave on an "urgent work-related trip." Later the same day, an informed source in Syktyvkar told Forum 18 that the diocese only spoke to journalists it had accredited.

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