



This article was published by F18News on: 18 November 2004

RUSSIA: Pressure on Tatarstan Protestants

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

The head of the FSB security service in Aznakayevo, a town in mainly Muslim-populated Tatarstan, has strongly denied to Forum 18 News Service that his officers have tried to expel Rafis Nabiullin, the pastor of a small Evangelical church, from the town. "We have made no threats to drive Nabiullin out," the FSB officer told Forum 18. Pastor Nabiullin told Forum 18 that an FSB officer had visited his flat, and "told me he had come 'unofficially', but that the FSB authorities in the town didn't want us there and intended to drive us out." Nabiullin commented that "it seems to have been a private initiative." Other Protestants have told Forum 18 that such pressure is widespread in Tatarstan, Nabiullin telling Forum 18 that "the authorities are Muslim and don't want Christianity, though they can tolerate Orthodoxy. They want to stop our activity."

Rafis Nabiullin, a Tatar pastor of a small Evangelical church in the town of Aznakayevo in the mainly Muslim-populated republic of Tatarstan, the capital of which is Kazan 800 km. (495 miles) east of Moscow, has complained of threats from a local FSB security service officer to halt the church's activity and drive him out of the town. At the end of October the officer visited his flat, requested his documents and asked questions about the church. "At first he wouldn't identify himself, but did so eventually," Nabiullin told Forum 18 News Service on 18 November. "At the end he told me he had come 'unofficially', but that the FSB authorities in the town didn't want us there and intended to drive us out." The town's FSB chief, Danis Valeyev, strongly denied to Forum 18 that any of his officers had visited or threatened Nabiullin in the past year.

"If you are making such accusations you should prove them," Valeyev told Forum 18 from Aznakayevo on 18 November. "Otherwise it would be slander." He said he and his officers "never threaten or have threatened" anyone. "We have made no threats to drive Nabiullin out of the town - we do not have the right to say who lives here."

Nabiullin said the visiting FSB officer was not of senior rank and told him he had come at the instigation of Valeyev's deputy. He refused to show Nabiullin his FSB identity card. "It is possible Valeyev does not know he came as it seems to have been a private initiative." When Nabiullin was pressured in summer 2003 the threats came directly from Valeyev. He said such threats to Protestants happen everywhere in Tatarstan, "but if you stand your ground they don't go further than threats".

Valeyev admitted he had warned Nabiullin last summer, but claimed this was because the pastor had obtained a flat "by deception" and had been inviting children to services without the permission of their parents or of the teachers at the local children's home. He claimed parents and teachers had complained to the FSB, but declined to say why this issue was the FSB's responsibility. He strenuously denied that the FSB has any interest in religious activity "provided that religious groups are registered and act openly" (Russia's religion law does not require religious communities to register).

According to Nabiullin, he received a visit last summer from Valeyev and was subsequently invited to the FSB offices, where the issue of children's attendance was raised. But he said Valeyev also threatened him, calling the church a "sect", demanding a list of church members and others who attend, and promising he would do everything to expel him from the town. Valeyev also invited Nabiullin's then landlord, banned him from renting to Nabiullin and fined him.

Nabiullin insisted that the children - who were between 10 and 14 years of age - had come to church last year of their own accord. "The director of the children's home and the teachers had banned them from coming but they came anyway," he told Forum 18. "They are prevented from coming now." He said no children who had parents had attended without their permission.

After that, Nabiullin reported, he had not had any direct contact with the FSB until the most recent visit, though the police had occasionally questioned him about his personal registration. "That is just an excuse for some petty harassment," he told Forum 18.

He reported that two days after the October FSB visit, his landlord abruptly cancelled the family's rental agreement, although he had paid four months' rent in advance and had lived there only 19 days. Nabiullin believes that the timing of the FSB visit and the cancellation of the rental agreement was "a mere coincidence".

Eduard Khamidulin, president of the Association of Evangelical Free Churches of Tatarstan - to which the Aznakayevo church belongs - also expressed some concern about the FSB visit. "It is certain that last year the FSB were trying to get Nabiullin out of the

town," he told Forum 18 on 16 November. "This time I'm not sure how far it will go." He added that he did not regard such pressure as typical of Tatarstan as a whole.

But other Protestants believe such pressure - especially on ethnic Tatar churches - is widespread. "The pressure from the government on Evangelicals in 'democratic' Tatarstan has been increasing over the last years," one who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 in early November. "Several foreign missionaries have been expelled from Tatarstan and national Christian leaders have been interrogated by the security service."

Nabiullin cites pressure on pastors in other towns in Tatarstan, including the capital Kazan, in Bugulma and elsewhere. "The FSB checks up - that's their job," he told Forum 18. "But they try to intimidate believers, especially Protestants. Muslims and Russian Orthodox have no such problems. I know several pastors in our association who have faced pressure, but the difficulties are generally resolved."

And he added: "The authorities are Muslim and don't want Christianity, though they can tolerate Orthodoxy. They want to stop our activity." He said Protestant churches often cannot rent public buildings or show evangelistic films. "We can't rent a hall in Aznakayevo - we've tried many times, even this year," he reported. "The directors of the local club and the cinema told us to go to the town administration, saying if we got approval from them we could rent. But we just face permanent refusal." He said he believed more people would attend meetings in a public building than do so in a private flat.

Nabiullin moved to Aznakayevo four years ago and started a small Christian fellowship in his flat. He said the church, which now has registration as a religious community with the Justice Ministry, has about a dozen regular worshippers at its Sunday services in a private flat. Because of the difficulty of changing their official place of residence, he and his wife are registered in other towns in Tatarstan.

In October last year, Takhir Talipov, an ethnic Tatar Baptist church-planter who had been living locally for more than a decade was denied a residency permit in Tatarstan due to his evangelical activity. A Kazan court upheld the decision in December making use of an assessment drawn up by the FSB that Talipov's activity was "extremist" and liable to threaten stability (see F18News 12 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=226).

For background information see Forum 18's Russia 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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