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RUSSIA: Parliamentary Religion Committee back in action

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service

The increase in Russian legislative initiatives affecting freedom of religion or belief since President Putin's May 2012 return appears partly due to renewed activism by the Committee on Social Associations and Religious Organisations of the Duma (parliament), Forum 18 News Service notes. The Duma is a rubber-stamp parliament endorsing any idea coming from Putin's Presidential Administration, Boris Falikov of the Centre for the Study of Religions at the Russian State University for the Humanities told Forum 18. "But initiatives in the religious sphere mostly conform to the personal convictions of the Committee's members". Alexander Verkhovsky of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis noted in relation to "astoundingly nonsensical laws" that: "the 'anti-opposition' campaign begun since Putin's return to the Kremlin involves a kind of 'competition between initiatives', and basic technical control over these initiatives is much weaker than before".

An increase in Russian legislative initiatives affecting freedom of religion or belief since Vladimir Putin's May 2012 return to the Kremlin appears at least partly due to renewed activism by the Committee on Social Associations and Religious Organisations within the Duma (parliament), Forum 18 News Service observes.

While the most notorious initiative backed by the Committee - against "offending religious feelings" - entered force on 1 July 2013, it remains unclear how far it will be used to restrict public expression of religious or other worldviews (see F18News 14 August 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1864>).

The Duma's Religion Committee has also backed a number of other recent legislative initiatives affecting religious freedom (see F18News 15 August 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1865>).

Forum 18's citation of drafts and related documents follow those on the Duma's official website.

Background

During most of Putin's first two presidential terms (2000 to 2008), his United Russia party controlled nearly all Duma committees. This included the Religion Committee: from 2003, its chair Sergei Popov and all but two members represented United Russia. No extensive legislative initiative directed against freedom of religion or belief was adopted during this period.

Once parties other than United Russia increased their Duma seats in the December 2011 parliamentary elections, chairship of the Religion Committee passed to the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party. Only four of the Committee's eight members are now United Russia representatives.

Religious issues are not a priority for the Liberal Democrats: on receiving this and other chairships in December 2011, their leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy commented that his party had been allotted "only rubbish", Interfax news agency reported. Zhirinovskiy's track record, however, is of backing restrictions on "non-traditional" faiths such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals, including as co-author of a 1997 book on "Pseudo-Christian Religious Organisations of Russia".

Until late 2003, the Religion Committee was particularly active under Communist Party chair Viktor Zorkaltsev, most notably as the driving force behind the 1997 Religion Law.

Renewed activity

Under new chair Yaroslav Nilov (Liberal Democratic Party), the Religion Committee is once again becoming active.

Nilov announced the creation of a working group to study "the activity of representatives of non-traditional religions" on 17 April, RIA Novosti news agency reported. This is because "the topic of sects is disturbing and worrying," he remarked.

Nilov further explained that the initiative came from and will be headed by Committee first vice-chair Mikhail Markelov (United Russia). On 21 May Markelov announced that corresponding legislative proposals could appear before the Duma in autumn 2013, as

"we need to create order in this sphere because the growth of sectarian organisations is a threat to the security of our country," Garant news agency reported.

Telephone numbers for Nilov, Markelov and Committee adviser Stepan Medvedko went unanswered whenever Forum 18 rang on 13, 14 and 15 August.

Political reasons

The Duma is a rubber-stamp parliament endorsing any idea coming from Putin's Presidential Administration, and the Religion Committee is no exception to this, Boris Falikov of the Centre for the Study of Religions at the Russian State University for the Humanities pointed out to Forum 18 on 15 August. "But initiatives in the religious sphere mostly conform to the personal convictions of the Committee's members, who really suppose their actions defend the feelings of believers and help to improve the moral climate in this country," he remarked. Consequently, the Committee's current activity is a mixture of "the hardline and short-sighted policy dictated by the Kremlin" and the good intentions of some lawmakers, Falikov suggested. "But I think it is said of such 'good intentions' that they pave the road to hell."

Alexander Verkhovsky - who monitors nationalism, xenophobia and threats to freedom of religion or belief in Russia at the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis - places more emphasis on the role of the Kremlin. Its current use of religious-moral issues is not so much due to genuine interest in them, he suggested to Forum 18 on 9 August, but in order to mobilise political support. "The idea of pragmatic leadership in the name of the 'entire people' that defined Putin's second, and partly first, presidential terms has been abandoned in favour of a somewhat amorphous, but certainly conservative and anti-Western, populist platform," Verkhovsky maintained. Its purpose is to isolate the political opposition as "moral outcasts", he added.

While containing ideological supporters of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), the Duma's Religion Committee plays a junior role here, Verkhovsky pointed out. "Nevertheless, the 'anti-opposition' campaign begun since Putin's return to the Kremlin involves a kind of 'competition between initiatives', and basic technical control over these initiatives is much weaker than before," he continued. This is clear, Verkhovsky suggested, from such "astoundingly nonsensical laws" as the law against "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations".

The "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" law bans among other things equating same-sex and heterosexual relationships. Like the "offending religious feelings" law it was passed by the Duma on 28 June, signed by President Putin on 29 June, and came into force on 1 July. Critics of both laws fear that the new amendments are so poorly defined that they could be used by anyone to prosecute actions they simply dislike (see F18News 14 August 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1864>).

Limited support

A recent exchange at the Duma between pro-Patriarchate activists and Religion Committee chair Nilov indeed suggests that the Committee does not fully share their agenda. The activists complained to Nilov that the revised amendments on "offending religious feelings" "equally defend sectarians and Orthodox", Izvestia newspaper reported on 9 April.

("Sectarians" is a term typically used in Russia to refer to disfavoured religious believers such as Baptists, Hare Krishna devotees, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals.)

Nilov reportedly responded: "Initially we thought the same way, but we were told we were violating the constitutional equality of religious organisations. (...) This is your work: if people go to them ["sectarians"], that means they find something there. Perform advocacy work, stage pickets - make people come to you, and not to them. And if they violate the law, report it."

At this, the activists reportedly expressed disappointment that, for Nilov, "sectarians are also citizens."

Amendments stalled

A related pro-Patriarchate legislative initiative has similarly failed to win the Duma's support.

Aimed against "sects", draft amendments to the Religion Law proposed shortly after Putin's return to the Kremlin by Communist Party deputy Andrei Tychinin initially had strong backing, but they have since stalled (draft law no. 78621-6). According to a 28 May 2012 announcement on the Communist Party's website, the draft would have helped to prevent "many alternative religious communities (most being sects) from being formed on Russian territory".

Tychinin's proposals would have raised the minimum membership of a religious organisation from 10 to 50, and the minimum composition of a centralised religious organisation from three to 30 communities. The draft would also have subjected meetings for religious worship in private homes to regional law, which opponents of religious freedom have found far easier than federal law to amend to their liking (see Forum 18's general Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1722>).

Deputy Tychinin's initiative received a positive preliminary recommendation from the Duma's Religion Committee on 22 June 2012, and was set to go before parliament that December. However, the draft was finally withdrawn on 15 October. A 4 July government assessment of the proposals - with an appendix by then Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov - had objected that the Religion Law was already satisfactory. Surkov resigned from his post in May 2013.

Amendments diluted

Some pro-Patriarchate legislative proposals have been adopted in diluted form. A 2 July 2013 amendment to the Religion Law allows worship in religious buildings on the territory of educational organisations, as well as premises belonging to educational organisations that were used for worship historically (Article 16, Part 3).

While this marks a concession to the Patriarchate, the initial draft of this amendment would have allowed educational organisations to permit worship on any of their premises at the request of parents and/or pupils, irrespective of whether they had been used for worship historically (draft law no. 121975-6).

Nilov of the Religion Committee spoke against the initial version of the amendment on 19 November 2012, believing it would lead to "unnecessary speculation" on the issue of freedom of conscience, SOVA reported. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722>, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724>.

The Economist's review of Geraldine Fagan's book "Believing in Russia - Religious Policy after Communism" (Routledge, 2013) is available here <<http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21571111-new-look-religion-post-1991-russia-question-faith>>. The books' comprehensive overview of Russian religious policy argues that continuing failure to resolve the question of whether Russia is to be an Orthodox country with religious minorities or a multi-confessional state is destabilising the nation.

An analysis of the way that the Russian authorities have used the Pussy Riot case to intensify restrictions on freedom of religion or belief is at F18News 15 October 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1754>.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <<http://www.sova-center.ru>>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468>.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <<http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru>> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570>.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>>.

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