



This article was published by F18News on: 2 August 2005

RUSSIA: When will Dalai Lama next visit Tuva?

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

The Dalai Lama's only visit to the traditionally Buddhist Russian republic of Tuva was in 1992. Since then, none of the "very many attempts" to invite him to the republic has come close to success, a former khamby-lama (head Buddhist of Tuva) told Forum 18 News Service. "Religion shouldn't interfere in politics, but we want to see him," Norbu-Sambuu Mart-Ool noted to Forum 18. The Dalai Lama has several times visited Russia's two other traditionally Buddhist republics of Buryatia and Kalmykia. But the main obstacle to a visit to Tuva - which borders Mongolia - seems to be Russian relations with China, which opposes a visit taking place. Mart-Ool told Forum 18 that the efforts of Kalmykia's president were instrumental in ensuring the Dalai Lama's two-day visit to that republic, following several years of visa denials, but lamented that "our council of ministers is not so active." Tuva's main religious affairs official told Forum 18 that the republic's Buddhist community alone issues invitations to its Tibetan spiritual leader, while adding that the Tuvan government would provide assistance with transport and premises.

Since his last and only visit to Tuva in 1992, none of the "very many attempts" to invite the fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso to the traditionally Buddhist Russian republic has come close to success, a former khamby-lama (head Buddhist of Tuva) has told Forum 18 News Service. "Religion shouldn't interfere in politics," Norbu-Sambuu Mart-Ool told Forum 18 at Tsechenling Buddhist temple in the Tuvan capital Kyzyl on 1 July, "but we want to see him." The fourteenth Dalai Lama has visited Russia's two other traditionally Buddhist republics - Buryatia and Kalmykia - on several occasions.

In Mart-Ool's view, the efforts of Kalmykia's president, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, proved instrumental in ensuring the Dalai Lama's two-day visit to that republic late in 2004 following several years of visa denials to Russia: "Our council of ministers is not so active." Speaking to Forum 18 beneath a large portrait of the Dalai Lama in his office on 1 July, Tuva's main religious affairs official Kambaa Biche-Ool confirmed that the republic's Buddhist community alone issues invitations to its Tibetan spiritual leader, while adding that the Tuvan government would provide assistance with transport and premises should a visit take place. There has so far been no answer from Russia's Foreign Ministry to a visa request for the Dalai Lama to visit Tuva made in spring 2005 by current khamby-lama Sat Apysh-Ool, he told Forum 18.

In April 2004 Russia's Foreign Ministry openly insisted that relations with China must play a part in determining a visit by the Dalai Lama. On the eve of the Tibetan leader's subsequent arrival in the Kalmykian capital Elista - during which he made no contact with state representatives - Russian news agencies reported China's foreign minister Li Zhaoxing as stating that: "China will not forgive a country which allows its territory to be used by the Dalai Lama to conduct propaganda of separation and sow discord with the People's Republic of China."

Revered as the ninth Bogdo Gegen, the third most important spiritual teacher in the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism after the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama, Jetsun Dhampa has had rather more success visiting Russia in recent years, despite being refused a visa in 2000. Norbu-Sambuu Mart-Ool told Forum 18 that the ethnic Tibetan was greeted by large crowds at Kyzyl's Five Years of Soviet Tuva Stadium in September 1999, that he made a second visit in 2003 and was unable to return in 2004 only due to ill health. On 21 July 2005 Tuva Online news website reported that Bogdo Gegen Jetsun Dhampa would be touring Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva in early August.

Dr Marina Mongush, an expert on Buddhism in Tuva based at the republic's Humanities Research Institute, explained to Forum 18 on 30 June that successive incarnations of Bogdo Gegen had historically been responsible for the spread of Buddhism in Tuva and that all the republic's khuree (Buddhist monasteries) were subordinate to him prior to their destruction in the 1930s. Until the socialist take-over in 1921, Bogdo Gegen was both sovereign ruler and spiritual leader of neighbouring Mongolia, where the Buddhist community has yet to receive a government response to repeated requests for him to make an official visit to the country since 1990 (see F18News 27 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=197).

In addition to mixed success in inviting these Tibetan spiritual authorities to Tuva, the republic's Buddhist representatives have not been able to win the state's support in keeping others out, according to Mart-Ool. Two Tibetan lamas who initially came to Tuva ten years ago under a 1993-95 agreement on cultural and religious co-operation between the Tibetan and Tuvan governments now have Russian citizenship and work privately, he told Forum 18: "We can't do anything about it." Religious affairs official Kambaa Biche-Ool confirmed that the state authorities had not obstructed the two lamas, Geshe Dakpa Gualtso and Geshe Tkhupten Lobsan,

from registering Buddhist organisations independently from the Kamby-Lama's Directorate in 2001 and 2004 respectively.

Also able to work separately from the kamby-lama's organisation - to which the republic's 16 other regional Buddhist communities are affiliated - is a third Tibetan with Russian citizenship, Dzhampa Tinlei. Mart-Ool maintained to Forum 18 that Tinlei - until 2000 the Dalai Lama's representative in Russia - follows a different tradition within the Gelug school from that traditional to Tuva, "that's why we don't get on with him." On 30 June Forum 18 observed Tinlei giving a public lecture on Buddhist philosophy to approximately 350 Tuvans in central Kyzyl.

Despite the failure of obtaining state assistance in ensuring a monopoly for the kamby-lama's organisation, however, Mart-Ool conceded to Forum 18 that "we do receive help from the state." Both Tsechenling temple and the kamby-lama's residence in Kyzyl were built with state funds, he confirmed, while the recent restoration of Ustuu Khuree in Chadan, western Tuva, was sponsored by Russia's Tuvan-born emergencies minister Sergei Shoigu and the son of Tuvan president Sherig-Ool Oorzhak.

Kambaa Biche-Ool explained to Forum 18 that the state's financial contributions to the local Buddhist community were intended to compensate for the almost complete destruction of Buddhist culture by the socialist Tuvan People's Republic prior to its entry into the Soviet Union in 1944. Biche-Ool claimed not to have a text of what he described as a similar gesture - the 1993-95 agreement with Tibet - nor of Tuva's own religion law. Dr Marina Mongush, however, told Forum 18 that while this local law acknowledges Buddhism, shamanism and Orthodoxy to be Tuva's traditional confessions, it does not afford them any special privileges.

However in education policy and schools, depending on the approach of individual teachers, favoritism towards shamanism and Buddhism does take place and the republic has closed down the only Christian children's home (see F18News 25 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=615). Tuva's largest Christian church has also disbanded to avoid official liquidation (see F18News 18 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=609).

The southern, traditionally Buddhist, Russian republic of Kalmykia, west of the Caspian Sea in European Russia, also has a policy of state support of Buddhism (see F18News 11 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=29). Protestants in the republic have been described as "western spies" (see F18News 14 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=31) and officials have expressed "concern" about the growth of non-Buddhist and non-Russian Orthodox religions, as well as "incorrect trends" within Buddhism (see F18 News 15 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=32).

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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