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RUSSIA: Old Believers summoned by ex-KGB before church leadership election

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

Some 12 years after the collapse of the Soviet regime, an Old Believer representative has told Forum 18 News Service that he believes ex-KGB officials were acting "out of inertia" when they voiced preference for one of two candidates on the eve of his Church's 9 February leadership election. Romil Khrustalev added, however, that the energetic Andrian (Chetvergov) was elected metropolitan even though the Russian secret service apparently favoured the other candidate. Both Khrustalev and a Moscow Patriarchate representative told Forum 18 that a report claiming that Metropolitan Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church had acted similarly to the ex-KGB was false. Accounting for only a few per cent of the Russian population at most, the Old Believers say that they have "no idea" why the state should take an interest in the identity of their leader.

FSB (former KGB) officials were acting "out of inertia" when they summoned Old Believer clergy on the eve of their Church's leadership election and made it clear that they preferred one of the two candidates, in the view of the assistant to both newly elected Metropolitan Andrian (Chetvergov) and the late Metropolitan Alimpi (Gusev).

Speaking to Forum 18 News Service at the Moscow headquarters of the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church (Belokrinitsa Concord) on 13 February, Romil Khrustalev remarked that the FSB had proceeded "in accordance with the same old practices as when they used to direct the Church." He pointed out, however, that Bishop Andrian of Kazan and Vyatsk was nevertheless elected metropolitan with 167 votes in the 9 February secret ballot, whereas the candidate apparently preferred by the FSB, Bishop Ioann (Vitushkin) of Kostroma and Yaroslavl, received 59 votes.

On 10 February Russian religious affairs website Portal-Credo reported that the majority of the Old Believer priests who were "forced to participate in discussions" about the forthcoming election with FSB officials on 8 February "received the impression that the state representatives supported the candidacy of Bishop Ioann."

Romil Khrustalev told Forum 18 that his Church "had no idea" why the Russian secret service might have preferred to see Bishop Ioann elected leader rather than Bishop Andrian. However, he himself pointed out that, at 53, Metropolitan Andrian is 26 years younger than his rival, and represents "a new trend - the rejuvenation of our Church after a period of stagnation." According to Khrustalev, the new metropolitan is particularly renowned for preaching and practical activity, including the creation of ten new parishes in Kazan and Vyatsk diocese since his consecration as its bishop in 2001. A news item on the recent election of the new metropolitan broadcast by Russian national NTV television channel on 12 February claimed that Andrian "has a reputation for being an energetic bishop and calls his faith 'pure'." It went on to show footage of the newly-elected metropolitan explaining that Old Believers "try and preserve the purity [of faith] which existed before the schism [of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1666]."

Khrustalev acknowledged to Forum 18 that the FSB's interest in the election of his Church's new leader was strange: "Even if there are as many as four million Old Believers in Russia, this accounts for only a few per cent of the population." He also pointed out that the Old Believers' only influence on the people was spiritual: "We aren't linked to any political issue." According to Khrustalev, members of the Belokrinitsa Concord (the largest Old Believer branch in Russia, which has a church hierarchy and retains all seven sacraments) has registered all 230 of its parishes with the state, supports military service by laymen and does not condone the rejection of passports or tax identity numbers.

On 16 February a spokesman at the FSB press centre informed Forum 18 that questions submitted in writing would be answered within ten days. While an 11 August 2003 presidential decree permits the FSB to participate in security arrangements for religious events, Russia's 1995 law "On Operational-Investigative Activity" prohibits state organs from "secretly participating in the activity of registered religious organisations... with the aim of influencing the nature of that activity."

The Portal-Credo news item also reported that support for the candidacy of Bishop Ioann was similarly expressed during a 28 January meeting between Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and representatives of the Belokrinitsa Concord. Speaking to Forum 18 on 16 February, however, Dmitry Petrovsky of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations - who was present at the meeting - denied that this was the case. Also

present at the meeting, Romil Khrustalev agreed, adding: "We have good personal relations with Metropolitan Kirill." According to Khrustalev, the meeting primarily concerned the possibility of two former Old Believer church buildings being transferred to the Belokrinitsa Concord by the Moscow city authorities. On this issue, both Khrustalev and Petrovsky maintained that the Moscow Patriarchate supported the Old Believers' position.

In general, Romil Khrustalev maintained to Forum 18 that his Church did not encounter particular discrimination when dealing with the Russian state authorities. Although refused empty church buildings previously belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) in Irkutsk, Barnaul and Ioshkar-Ola, he said, Old Believer parishes have been given land in lieu on which they have built new churches. In Kostroma and Yaroslavl regions, he said, there have been cases in which the state authorities had intended to return former Old Believer church buildings to the Moscow Patriarchate, but reconsidered after protests by the Belokrinitsa Concord. Regarding individual items of church property, however, Khrustalev commented that government officials often automatically return Old Believer icons to the Moscow Patriarchate. "We are displeased with that state policy," 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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