

RUSSIA: Russian pastor flees religious persecution to seek asylum in Germany

Religious minorities in Russia often face persecution. A Russian pastor's family had to flee Sochi. Now they hope they can live in Germany.

DW (21.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2xATn0s> – “Why Germany? The Protestant Church here is strong,” explains Alexey Kolyasnikov when asked why he applied for political asylum in Germany. The pastor hopes that German authorities will grant him asylum. “It is very dangerous to return to Russia. There, I will be declared a terrorist and put behind bars,” says Kolyasnikov.

Since the end of July 2017, the pastor, his wife and three daughters have been living in a refugee shelter in the western German city of Leverkusen. In the school gymnasium that has been furnished to temporarily accommodate refugees, the Kolyasnikovs share what little space they have with refugees from Chechnya.

“Unauthorized gathering” in a café

Kolyasnikov is convinced that he is being persecuted for his religious activities in Russia. In 2014, the pastor held a gathering with his Pentecostal congregation. As they do not have their own church building, the congregation members met in a café in Sochi as usual. On that evening, police officers and members of the Russia's main intelligence agency, the Federal Security Service (FSB) suddenly appeared during the bible reading. They accused Kolyasnikov of holding an unauthorized gathering, which is a civil violation.

“Six weeks previously, a young woman attended our gathering for the first time. From then on, she took part in everything

– she was very interested in the topics we discussed. However, on the evening the FSB appeared, she did not come alone, but with a friend, as she called him,” recalls Kolyasnikov.

Later, it turned out that the supposed friend actually worked for the intelligence agency FSB. That young woman and her friend later testified against the pastor in court. Alexander Popkov, Kolyasnikov’s lawyer, said that in the past, the woman had also appeared in trials against other religious communities in Sochi.

The judges imposed a fine on Kolyasnikov for “organizing an unauthorized gathering.” After filing an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for the violation of his right to religious freedom in the Russian Federation, the pressure started to mount. And then, all at once, a Ukrainian trail was added to the story.

Euromaidan supporter

DW is in possession of a copy of a letter sent to the public prosecutor’s office of the southern Russian Krasnodar region. In it, then-FSB Major-General Alexander Rodionov not only documented civil violations but also the pastor’s direct links to the events in Ukraine in the winter of 2013 and spring of 2014.

The letter states that “upon taking power, ‘Euromaideners’ – whose religious conviction is based on the ideology of pro-West Protestant religious movements and is supported by the EU as well as NATO – a growing threat of ‘anti-Russian’ hotspots has developed, through which social and ideological tension is emanated.” After that, Russia’s center for anti-extremism took on the case.

Kolyasnikov asserts that he, as a pastor, condemned all forms of violence and bloodshed in Kyiv. Moreover, he says that his religious beliefs did not allow him to support the revolution in Ukraine. “I was clearly against the Maidan. At that time,

we prayed for the good of the country and the president,” he claims. When he read the FSB report, he was shocked that security forces thought he had taken part in the Euromaidan protests.

“It is also ridiculous because I never went to Ukraine at the time. I was in Kyiv for the first time in 2016, and of course, many of my prejudices were dispelled. Nobody there attacked me because I spoke Russian. I felt very free there,” says the pastor. He is convinced that legal cases are opened arbitrarily against anyone and are always easily justified by links to the events in Ukraine.

The FSB’s revenge?

To this day, the pastor still does not fully understand the real reason for the mistreatment. He recalls an incident in 2012: “An FSB major demanded I speak to him. He told me he was investigating religious groups in Sochi. He stressed the fact that there was an increased terrorist threat in Russia. Then, he asked me to give him a list of my congregation members including their personal details.”

Kolyasnikov’s lawyer Alexander Popkov believes that many factors are at play in this case. Firstly, the situation in Russian has worsened because of the events in Ukraine. Furthermore, Russian security agencies want to keep religious communities in their country under control. “And Kolyasnikov has refused to be controlled,” claims Popkov.

.....

If you want to be regularly informed about different violations of human rights in the world, click here for a free subscription to our newsletters!

Also:

HRWF database of news and information on over 70
countries: <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>
List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various
faiths in 20
countries: [http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-li
st/](http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/)