

Russia charges Baptist pastor in a sign that its religious clampdown could be spreading

By Matthew Luxmoore

RadioFreeEurope (24.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2Pt08FV> – In Verkhnebakansky, a town just outside Novorossiisk on Russia's Black Sea Coast, Baptists gather in a small house with a set of windows in the shape of a Christian cross.

Their presence in the Krasnodar region goes back 110 years, the past 25 of which – since the Soviet collapse and the opening up of religious expression – have seen a faith long repressed by authorities flourish once again.

So it was a shock when, on April 7, as some 50 congregants celebrated Annunciation, law enforcement agents stormed in and interrupted the service.

According to presbyter Yevgeny Kokora, the choir temporarily halted its rendition of Jesus Is My Lighthouse while the pastor pleaded with the officers. They wrote up a report and left just as the service was drawing to a close.

The following day, Kokora went with 71-year-old pastor Yury Korniyenko to the prosecutor's office in Novorossiisk, seeking to file an official complaint. They were told the prosecutor wouldn't be taking visitors for the next three weeks. The local branch of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) heard the two Baptists out, Kokora told RFE/RL, but made no promises.

On April 9, Korniyenko received a court summons and was subsequently charged with engaging in illegal missionary work. His case will be heard this week, and he faces a hefty fine if

convicted.

“This is the first time we’ve had such troubles,” Kokora told RFE/RL in a telephone interview. “I don’t understand who needs this, who’s playing this card.”

While freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed in Russia, the relevant legislation names Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country’s four traditional, protected religions. Others with smaller presences in Russia, including denominations like Baptists, have been subjected to increased scrutiny in recent years.

In 2016, Russia introduced a package of laws outlawing missionary work outside officially designated places of worship, part a broader crackdown on minority faiths operating in the country.

The new laws have been cited as necessary measures in the state’s fight against extremism and have led to charges against hundreds of religious activists across the country and, in 2017, to an outright ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses, a Christian denomination with headquarters in the United States.

Roman Lunkin, a religious expert at the Russian Academy of Sciences, told RFE/RL that the Baptists in the Krasnodar region are falling victim to “not so much an expansion” of the government’s campaign against minority religions as “its logical continuation.”

The implication, he said, is that the clampdown will spread.

So far, the Baptist church in Russia has kept comparatively under the radar, despite a flock that Lunkin estimates at more than 250,000 people. Its members stand out from those of other minority faiths through their strong “civic stance,” Lunkin said – many are community leaders or members of local government.

But in November, its adherents were shaken by news that a pastor in Tatarstan had been fined 20,000 rubles (\$310) for organizing an unsanctioned public gathering: A group of Baptists had assembled that June to watch him baptize their newest member in the Kama River.

Kokora said he believes the campaign against his congregation is a largely local affair, a case of officials trying to curry favor with their superiors. He noted that Novorossiisk has seen several similar cases in recent weeks, but faith groups in other parts of Krasnodar have been largely left alone.

In March, the **Pentecostal meeting house in Novorosiisk was torn down** after officials declared it an unauthorized construction. Seventh-Day Adventists in the city have been banned from gathering for worship, Kokora said. They now travel to Gelendzhik, 50 kilometers away.

On March 1, law enforcement officers in Novorossiisk detained two Mormons – Americans Kole Brodowski, 20, and David Gaag, 19 – on suspicion of violating Russian immigration law. **They were released two weeks later** and deported to the United States.

The Baptist congregation in Verkhnebakansky has felt pressure from the authorities grow over the past year, according to Kokora. He said they've had weekly calls from officials demanding summaries of the latest sermon delivered, as well as reports on attendance.

On April 21, the deputy head of the Russian Baptist Union, Viktor Ignatenkov, visited Verkhnebakansky to discuss the April 7 incident and the possible legal repercussions for local church members. The meetings "gave everyone a sense of confidence in God's intercession," **the church said in a statement on April 23.**

Kokora, who spent four years working in the Novorossiisk administration and was a member of the city's civic council, said he is reluctant to try and leverage his official contacts

and plans instead to take the legal route by appealing to the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights in Moscow.

“We have laws, and we have courts. Let’s fix this through a legal framework,” he said.

That council may be the last hope for groups who feel targeted for their faith.

On December 11, in a meeting with council members, President Vladimir Putin suggested that official policy toward some religions should be liberalized.

“We probably can, and even at some point should, be much more liberal toward representatives of various religious sects,” he said.

Putin ordered Supreme Court Justice Vyacheslav Lebedev to oversee the drafting of a general legal framework for adjudicating cases brought against religious groups. The deadline is July 1.

Kokora is among thousands of believers vesting their hopes in the initiative as a chance to reverse what they see as a tightening of the screws on Russia’s minority faiths.

In the meantime, he awaits the court’s judgment.

“If this case becomes a precedent, then all our congregations will fall like a house of cards,” he said. “The administration’s hands will be untied.”

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