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Conviction of Activist Who Protested Baptism of Tatar Infants Decried

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

Last Friday's conviction in a Naberezhny Chelny court of a Tatar activist who had spoken out against the baptism of Tatar infants by a Russian Orthodox priest without the permission of their parents or guardians has sparked protests from the Tatar Social Center (TOTs) as well as from human and religious rights groups elsewhere.

On Friday, the court found TOTs leader Rafiz Kashapov guilty of provoking interethnic and inter-religious hostility (under Section 1 of Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code) for his article "No to Christianization!" in which he protested the baptism of infants of Tatar nationality, a traditionally Muslim people, and gave him a suspended sentence of 18 months.

The article appeared on Kashapov's blog shortly after a Russian Orthodox priest baptized the children on January 16th of this year without the knowledge or agreement of their parents. His article led to protests in several cities of Tatarstan, and his blog was subsequently suppressed by the authorities.

Now, following Kashapov's conviction and protests by several rights groups, his own Tatar Social Center has issued an appeal to human rights groups, social and political organizations, and the media of Tatarstan and Russia, denouncing this action and demanding that the authorities reverse course.

It is a measure of the extent to which the Russian government is in control of the media that the appeal has so far appeared only on other blogs &mdash see, for example, the complete text here &mdash or on websites hosted beyond the borders of Russia.

The declaration, signed by A.Sh. Zalyalutdinov, the chairman of the regional TOTs Assembly, and M.A. Shakirova, the secretary of that group, provides a remarkable portrait of the increasingly frequent misuse of Russia's anti-extremist laws and also the increasingly frequent cases of official and especially judicial malfeasance in the country.

After outlining the history of Kashapov's own protest, the declaration states that the investigation of his case occurred "with crude violations of the law," including moves by officials that prevented the accused attorneys from gaining access to information gathered by the government.

The trial itself, the declaration continues, was "closely controlled by the Moscow FSB and the court was subject to strong pressure from the prosecutor." Moreover, the court's decision reflected only the testimony of "experts" from Moscow and Kazan because the judge refused to consider "the declarations of independent experts" that were offered by Kashapov.

Both the facts of the case and these violations of judicial procedure, the authors of the declaration say, provide the basis for contending that "the sentence of the court is both without foundation and illegal." They say that lawyers for the accused will appeal the decision to the Supreme Court of Tatarstan.

"Many human rights activists, public figures and journalists," the declaration continues, not only in Tatarstan and Russia but in foreign countries, "have raised their voices in defense of Rafiz Kashapov, an important public figure who has stood up for the rights and interests of the Tatars and other peoples."

"We express our deep gratitude to them!" the appeal concludes, especially since some of them, like Ulyanovsk journalist Sergey Kryukov, have themselves become the object of Russian government persecution as a result. Kryukov's location at the present time, the appeal notes, is unknown.

The Kashapov case, as tragic as it is for him and the Tatars, highlights two more widespread problems in the Russian Federation, both of which have been well-documented in recent times. Firstly, Russian courts, as Moscow statistics show, are ever more willing to convict anyone the regime brings charges against.

And secondly, the Russian government, for all the talk about "a thaw" under Dmitry Medvedev, appears to be increasingly willing to control reporting about what is actually going on, either by taking down websites, as in Kashapov's case, or by directly corrupting

journalists.

In Soviet times, the Western media could be counted on to report such things, but unfortunately, their interest in doing so for whatever reason has declined. And as a result, those who do notice such abuses in Russia, especially beyond Moscow's ring road, have a special obligation to try to bring them to the attention of others.

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