The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Resin Wants Hearings on Religious Construction

By Paul Goble

October 06, 2010



Staunton ◙ On Oct. 5, the acting mayor of the Russian capital, Vladimir Resin, called for holding public hearings on all construction projects for churches, mosques and synagogues. That is a plan that could threaten existing relationships between Moscow's government and the Moscow Patriarchate.

It also could produce venues for Muslims to advocate for adding mosques to Moscow.

During a city government meeting that some religious leaders attended, Resin said the public hearings on religious construction were needed, RIA-Novosti reported. "it is necessary to initiate public hearings on each project for the construction of new churches, mosques and synagogues" so as to ensure the projects' compliance with the city's development plan, or Genplan, Resin said.

About The Columnist

Paul Goble is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious issues in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. Earlier he served as vice dean for the social sciences and humanities at Audentes University in Tallinn and was a senior research associate at the EuroCollege of the University of Tartu in Estonia.

Prior to that, he served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau, as well as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He can be contacted at paul.goble@gmail.com

If it is carried out, the program will have two different sets of consequences for the two largest religious communities in Moscow, Russian Orthodox Christians and Muslims, and the way they interact with both the city's bureaucracy and other residents.

For the Russian Orthodox, such hearings could complicate the cozy relationship that the Moscow Patriarchate has enjoyed with city authorities. To date, that relationship has meant that Moscow's government responded to the Church's requests without seeking input from the capital's population.

Now that appears likely to change. While few Muscovites are opposed to church construction per se, some may object to the building of a church in a particular location, or of a particular size. In fact, polls have shown that some residents of Russian cities are inclined to oppose any new construction.

In addition, the hearings suggested by Resin could easily become the occasion for representatives of other faiths, particularly Muslims, to make cases for construction of their own religious sites, arguing that if the Orthodox are allowed to build more churches, then they should be allowed to construct additional religious facilities as well.

But such hearings probably would be an occasion for those Muscovites who oppose the building of mosques in their neighborhoods ⊠ such as the residents of the Tekstilshchiki neighborhood ⊠ to express their views, perhaps giving them the chance to mobilize even more people to their point of view.

Hearings also would give Muslim residents an opportunity to mobilize and to express their views, something that could easily land those city officials charged with making a decision after such hearings in a politically difficult position.

Just how sensitive these issues are and how complicated the discussion of them in such forums will be is reflected in two items recently posted online. The first is the text of the presentation that Ravil Gainutdin made to a city government meeting Oct. 5, and the second is a report by Komsomolskaya Pravda on new church construction in Moscow.

Gainutdin, head of the Union of Muftis of Russia, said the shortage of mosques in the Russian capital is "an objective fact" and harms both Moscow's image and the ability of Islamic leaders to help integrate Muslim workers into Moscow's fabric.

He said a mosque "is not only a play for carrying out divine services and offering prayers."

Gainutdin continued, "The main thing is that in mosques, parishioners receive instruction, spiritual, moral and political training, and correct guidance on their life paths."

His organization, Gainutdin said, wants to devote "great efforts in education work to prevent or cure extremist attitudes and the radicalization among Muslim young people, especially those who come to work in Moscow from the North Caucasus and from countries abroad."

Such people ⊠ especially "the young who are cut off from their families and from parental guidance" ⊠ need to be able to go to a mosque "for the preservation of the best that genuine Muslim education can give."

Gainutdin said "in the mosque they will find true words and guidance which will help them orient themselves in the new situation and not commit acts which alienate the residents of the capital." As a result, he said, Moscow needs more than the four mosques that it currently has.

Meanwhile, the Komsomolskaya Pravda report suggested why Russian Orthodox officials may fight for the construction of more churches in Moscow. The article said that while the commonly used figure for Orthodox Church facilities in Moscow is 836, the real number is only 263.

That is because the difference consists of inside institutions that aren't available "for all." According to the Moscow Patriarchate, the city needs 591 more public churches so that there is one church for every 11,200 residents, a ratio that is found throughout the rest of Russia.

To that end, the Russian Orthodox Church is engaged in a building boom, with 35 new churches either under construction or soon to be constructed. Most of them are prefabricated buildings so that the Church can get them up in a hurry at the lowest possible cost.

Those 35 are part of the 200 churches that Yury Luzhkov supposedly approved in conversation with Patriarch Kirill and his hierarchs shortly before the mayor's ouster. But given Resin's call for hearings about all new construction, it remains to be seen whether there will be new fights about any of those churches, just as there continue to be arguments about potential new mosques.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/10/06/resin-wants-hearings-on-religious-construction-35130-a35130