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Religion News Service

1st Place
2003 Finalist Supple Award
Redefining Father Frost
Some Russians Want to Make Secular Figure a Godly One

MOSCOW -- Father Frost, a mythical figure fond of cold weather and children, dominates the last days of every Russian year. He is in television, billboard and newspaper ads peddling everything from beer to vacuum cleaners. He is on the minds of small children waiting for New Year's gifts.

In the world's most immense country, that kind of exposure translates into money and influence. So it is no surprise that a battle is underway to define just who Father Frost is -- part Soviet man, part ill-tempered pagan god and, lately, part Russian Orthodox Christian.

He is often compared to Santa Claus. Both Frost and Claus bear gifts, wear red and are on the portly side. But while Claus is a Christian saint -- Saint Nicholas -- who worked as a bishop in what is today Turkey, Frost had his beginnings in the mythology of Central Asia, eventually earning the respect of the pre-Christian Slavs of Russia's far north as the god of night, snow and death.

The less pleasant aspects of Frost's personality and past were glossed over by the atheist Communists, who ruled Russia from 1917 to 1991 and were masters of reworking history. They were eager to promote a faithless, blandly good figure to preside over a purely secular holiday, New Year's.

It worked.

Today, New Year's is Russia's most important holiday, bar none. It is a time for exchanging gifts, gathering families and drinking more than usual. Dec. 25 is an ordinary working day in Russia, where less than 1 percent of the population of 143 million are Roman Catholics or Protestants. Most people are nominally members of the Russian Orthodox Church, which still uses the Julian calendar, whose holidays lag 13 days behind those in the West.

Christmas comes on Jan. 7, and many Russian families mark Old New Year's Day on Jan. 13.

Frost's most vocal promoters are found in the city of Veliky Ustyug. They claimed Frost as a native son in 1997 and now are trying to extend Frost's reign over the winter holidays to take in Christmas and Old New Year's. Their aim is to establish Veliky Ustyug, a city of 50,000 people located 480 miles north of Moscow, as a leading winter tourist destination with Frost as the draw. Children are the
key.

Tatyana Moromtsva, general director of the city's Father Frost Stock Co., said 450 children made the 20-hour train ride from Moscow on Dec. 27 to spend part of the day with Frost. Veliky Ustyug's senior Father Frost later traveled to Moscow to take part in ceremonies at the Kremlin.

To keep Frost alive in the national consciousness during the off-season, children are encouraged to write him in Veliky Ustyug. Last year, about 60,000 children did, keeping four full-time employees busy writing replies by hand. Lest any child forget Frost's primacy in Russia, Moromtsva said, "everybody who writes Santa Claus gets answered by Father Frost."

Moscow newspapers were full of reports in December of plans to open a Father Frost Relaxation Park in Veliky Ustyug, complete with hotels, a residence for Frost made of ice, and a stable. Muscovite investors are hoping to lure as many as 150,000 tourists a year. Moromtsva said the Relaxation Park will include a new Russian Orthodox church for Frost, who "was a saint of sorts."

Local Orthodox leaders are beside themselves.

"The Orthodox Church has a very big objection to that park. I'm hoping that they will stop the project," said a Veliky Ustyug deacon who heads an Orthodox secondary school and spoke on condition of anonymity. He added that Father Frost "has nothing to do with religion."

"They want to use the children's park as a kind of cover for the adults to engage in all kinds of debauchery. That's what they are trying to do -- the higher-ups in Moscow," said the deacon, who scoffed at one Orthodox bishop's proposition that the mythical Frost could be made acceptable if he were baptized. "It is a terrible idea."

For Boris Pigaryov, one of the thousands of working Father Frosts to be found at this time of year at kindergarten pageants, office holiday parties and nightclubs, the notion of giving Frost a religious denomination, much less a Soviet-style rehabilitation from his pagan past, is repugnant.

"He is a fairy-tale figure. Creating any sort of a resume for him, it seems to me, is a bit forced," Pigaryov, 30, said as he changed into his burgundy Father Frost suit in a storage closet at Moscow's Kindergarten No. 1233.
Pigaryov's partner, snow maiden Tatyana Smirnova, had different ideas, saying it was high time Frost got religion. "Our people are Orthodox. If Frost were Orthodox, the kids could find out about their faith in a positive way without any pressure," Smirnova said. "It would all be part of their education."

The issue is more than academic, given the powerful hold the gift-bearing Frost has on children's psyches in this increasingly consumerist society. Pigaryov said he had no doubts about Frost until after kindergarten. Smirnova was a believer even longer.

While Russian Orthodox clerics seem ambivalent about what to do with Frost's ascendancy and commercial potential, leaders of other faiths in Russia are less equivocal.

"It is best not to pay any attention to him," said Rabbi Zakhariya Matatiyagu, of Moscow's Beit Talkhum Synagogue. "You can just explain to the kids that other people have different holidays."

###
Religious Persecution Rife in Uzbekistan

MARGILAN, Uzbekistan -- On a recent, cool, rainy afternoon, Abdulhakim Kori Vasiyev was lying in bed, covered in blankets and waiting for a nurse to come administer his daily intravenous dose of medicines for what ails him. At age 105, a lot is ailing Vasiyev. But nothing bothers him more than what the government is doing to his family, which numbers about 100 at this point.

To the government, Vasiyev, a dignified man with searching eyes and a stringy white beard, is the local face of Wahhabism. In Uzbekistan, a mostly Muslim police state of 23 million people, a person labeled a Wahhabi can expect arrest, beatings, rape, forced confession and, finally, up to 18 years in prison. Vasiyev is too old for that, but the rest of his family isn't.

"The government has a little bit of conscience. They are not going to send him to prison," said Sirojidain Azimov, 61, as he sat at his father-in-law's bedside. "So they go after us instead."

Vasiyev's youngest son, 27-year-old Abdulvali Vasiyev, is currently serving the second of 18 years he got for "revolutionary activity."

Other male relatives who are not in prison are required to report to the local police station every month and sign a statement swearing not to travel, to take part in meetings or to teach Islam.

Vasiyev's teaching abilities and spiritual authority are legendary. His former students serve as mullahs and imams at mosques throughout Central Asia and Russia. The one thing Vasiyev has never taught, he insists, is Wahhabism. Instead, he espouses Central Asia's dominant Hanafi school of Sunni Islam.

All the same Vasiyev and his family, like thousands of other Uzbek citizens, are labeled Wahhabis. It is a term used widely and often incorrectly in the former Soviet Union to indicate Muslims bent on imposing a perverted version of Islam unrecognized in the Muslim world. In fact, Wahhabism is an ultra-conservative, puritanical Muslim movement that is the state religion of Saudi Arabia.

According to Marie Struthers, who covers Uzbekistan for the New York-based Human Rights Watch, the country's prisons are holding up to 6,500 religious prisoners. Other estimates by Russian and Uzbek human rights activists range much higher. These are men convicted of being Wahhabis, of supporting the outlawed Hizb-ut-Tahrir Islamic party or helping the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which fought alongside the Taliban and was also crushed last year in Afghanistan.

While certainly some of the imprisoned are guilty of fighting against Uzbek government troops or plotting the overthrow of President Islam Karimov's totalitarian government, others were tortured or
threatened into confessing to nonexistent crimes and implicating others, Struthers said.
The net result of a government policy designed to reduce Islam's influence and create a stable democracy, Struthers said, is the opposite.
"It builds stoicism, resistance and anger," she said, adding that "stoicism, resistance and anger do not promote security."
In Ferghan, a regional center located next to Margilan, human rights activist Abdusalam Ergashev has monitored more than 20 religious trials involving some 100 defendants. Not one of the accused was acquitted.
"Now no one believes what is going on -- that these are terrorists," Ergashev said, adding that the well-documented use of torture and rape to extort confessions is also yielding bitter fruit. "Hatred is growing toward law enforcement. People know what is going on in the prisons. When these men get out of prison, they say what happened."
On a recent spring day in the heavily guarded Ferghan courthouse, two public trials were under way, each involving 14 men. Everyone was accused of being a Wahhabi; some faced additional drug charges, others weapons charges.
During a break in one of the trials, Chief Judge Vakhid Nazarov was at first reluctant to talk about the charges against the men, who faced up to 18 years in prison.
"They are accused of Wahhabism," he said, declining to be more specific. "It would not be correct for me to speak about what they are accused of."
Pressed for a legal definition of "Wahhabism," the judge responded, "I know what a Wahhabi is ... but I cannot answer that question."
Back in Tashkent, a six-hour drive through the mountains, one of the government's leading religious affairs experts has a host of other arguments for the ongoing crackdown on all forms of independent Islam not sanctioned by the government.
"If there is a trial going on, then someone broke the law. No one is merely persecuted for their faith," said Shoazim Minovarov, a cordial man who is a deputy chairman of the government's Religious Affairs Committee.
Minovarov also defended the practice of having a government-controlled Muslim board screen the Friday sermons delivered in mosques nationwide, of expelling all foreign Muslim missionaries and of closing down Muslim schools.
"If you don't punish these people, then tomorrow you are going to have 100 people ready to take over planes and fly them into buildings," he said.
While Minovarov's logic may resonate in post-Sept. 11 America, Ergashev believes that past experience in the region shows otherwise.
"In history this has happened before. In the Soviet Union, under
Stalin," said Ergashev, who was imprisoned from 1969 to 1972 on a conviction of "anti-Soviet agitation" stemming from an argument he had with a university professor about politics.

== 30 ==
MOSCOW -- The three ambulances and the van from the Ministry of Emergency Situations parked in the snow were a sure sign this was not going to be a typical Russian Orthodox Church service. Another sign was the half-dozen policemen on the edge of the crowd, smoking, chatting and looking for any sign of trouble as midnight approached and Friday became Saturday -- Epiphany -- in the northernmost country in the Orthodox Christian world.

It turned out that the ambulances and the policemen had little to do other than keep warm as the temperature hovered just under freezing. Midnight peacefully arrived and Father Mark Golovkov and his candle-holding choir took their places at the edge of the ice-bound, snow-covered Moscow River. Golovkov crouched at the edge of a rectangular pool hacked out of the foot-thick ice. Three times he immersed his footlong gold crucifix, blessing the small body of water. Moments later, the wiry monk stepped away from the water's edge and, almost immediately, a group of men wearing skimpy bathing suits walked purposefully across the snow and jumped into the river. As steaming pink flesh met frigid black water, the bathers yelped, gasped and spluttered. The process went on for over an hour as several hundred men, women and a few children jumped in and -- very quickly -- climbed out.

It was a scene repeated Saturday (Jan. 19) at hundreds of ponds, lakes and rivers all over Russia, where Orthodox Christians, following the Julian Calendar, mark the Epiphany on Jan. 19, 13 days later than in Western Christendom. At Epiphany, Orthodox Christians celebrate Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan rather than the appearance of the Magi. The holiday in Russian is known simply as "kreshcheniye" -- baptism. In the liturgical calendar of the 80-million member Russian Orthodox Church, Epiphany is one of the most fun and believer-friendly holidays.

All day Saturday, believers toting glass jars and plastic bottles make their way to local churches to get a yearlong ration of holy water. Only a hardy minority actually immerse themselves in the holy water -- which is what believers reckon any body of water becomes on Epiphany after it is blessed.

Shortly before setting out for the river bank with the choir on Friday night, Golovkov found a quiet room in the church rectory and tried to explain Epiphany's wide appeal among the Orthodox. "Here we've got the idea that we are blessing nature. Of course every person strives for saintliness and here, in an encounter with nature, he gets a little," said Golovkov, 37, who earlier in the evening took a dip in the ice hole -- naked.

"There was no one around," he said. Epiphany's strong link with nature combined with Russians' generally
superstitious nature put the holiday at risk of becoming a neo-pagan ritual for undoing curses and warding off evil spirits. Golovkov, who lived seven years in Jerusalem and bathed in the River Jordan itself, is having none of that.

"It was an event in the life of Christ, so we celebrate it, simple as that," said Golovkov, the pastor of the nearby 16th-century Church of the Holy Trinity. "In a symbolic way, we each remember the baptism of Christ, our Lord.

That's not what every person was thinking about early Saturday morning on the Moscow River.

"I am not religious but my soul demanded that I come here," said Slava Burunov, 40, a construction supervisor, as he dried and dressed himself after swimming.

Aside from "a colossal sense of relief" after emerging from the freezing water, Burunov was hard-pressed to put into words why he decided to strip down and jump in. After thinking a bit, he offered, in a frustrated tone, "In general it is difficult to understand the Russian people." His wife, Natasha, a 32-year-old hairdresser, chimed in, smiling, "Sometimes we don't understand ourselves."

Not everyone approached the 15-foot-by-50-foot hole in the ice with Burunov's sense of resolve. One tall, lanky man wearing a black bathrobe with red trim conducted a good deal of reconnaissance before jumping in.

"What's the water like? Cold? How did it feel? Can you touch the bottom?" he asked the men in bathing suits and women in bikinis as they clambered onto the ice. Evidently satisfied with the answers, Eduard Mardakhanov, 36, a Jewish merchant, waded in and dunked himself the customary three times.

Another novice, Lyudmila Vukolova, described the experience as "not difficult," as she sipped a homemade mixture of vodka and herbs with family members.

"I used to do this at home," said the 44-year-old unemployed store clerk. "At midnight, I'd pour water on myself in the shower."

Standing next to Vukolova, her mother, Tamara Zaitseva, bemoaned the crowds and the lack of space for swimming.

"Before, when I was young, we'd just go to the pond and jump in. We used to actually swim around," said Zaitseva, 68, a retired housepainter, adding that believers organized the Epiphany celebration themselves without a priest.

Golovkov noted that during Russia's 70 years of Communist rule it was illegal to celebrate Epiphany with a public blessing outdoors. Even now, when the Russian Orthodox Church is one of the country's most powerful institutions, Golovkov doubted Epiphany celebrations would ever reach the level before the 1917 Russian Revolution.

"There just aren't that many rivers that aren't so polluted that they are absolutely poisonous," he said.
New, Potentially Deadly Anti-Semitism on Rise in Russia

MOSCOW -- In Russia these days it is all the rage to write an anti-Semitic slogan on a sign, attach some explosives (real or fake), put the sign in a well-traveled area and wait for the consequences.

Over the course of the summer at least 14 separate signs -- usually reading "Death to Yids" -- sprang up in cities from Moscow to Vladivostok.

The ominous, home-grown fad appears to be the work of unrelated people imitating the very first booby-trapped "Death to Yids" sign that blew up May 27 outside Moscow, severely injuring the passing motorist who tried to take it down.

Anti-Semitism, xenophobia and racism have long been a part of life in Russia, home of the pogrom and Soviet-era refuseniks. But this summer's trend goes beyond the synagogue arsons, the cemetery desecrations and the occasional bomb attacks that have been a staple of post-Soviet Jewish life.

While those incidents are nearly always treated as serious criminal acts by the police, the wave of booby-trapped signs has generally been dismissed by law enforcement as the work of bored hooligans taking part in a national fad.

"What worries me is that these people go unpunished," said Lyudmila Alekseyeva, who heads the Moscow Helsinki Group, an independent human rights organization. "Not only can the police not find them, but the police can't understand that this is anti-Semitism, not just a prank."

To date, police have made arrests in two of the 14 incidents, charging teenagers in St. Petersburg and the Siberian city of Kemerovo.

The first booby-trapped sign stood for over a day by a busy Moscow highway just 100 yards from a police station before Tatyana Sapunova, 27, stopped and tried to pull it out of the ground while her mother and daughter waited in the car.

The explosion injured Sapunova's face and left her with reduced vision. Moscow's Jewish community paid for her medical treatment in Israel and Russian president Vladimir Putin later awarded Sapunova a medal for her courage.

The local police were slow to investigate the exploding sign and quick to downplay the significance of its message. Lieutenant Nikolai Vagin told the Moscow daily Izvestia, "Is setting up such a sign a violation of law? I think that, strictly speaking, the slogan 'Death to Yids' is not incitement of interethnic discord. In our country anybody could be called a 'Yid.'"

Even after the Kremlin signified its interest in the rash of anti-Semitic signs attached to explosives, police seem at a loss. At 4 a.m. on July 28, a powerful pipe bomb next to a misspelled "Death to Yids" sign blew up outside an apartment building, where, curiously, no Jews live. No one was injured but the building's facade and six windows were damaged. Police dismissed the blast as "hooliganism."

"What is terrible is that they don't do anything," said Leopold
Kaimovsky, director of Moscow's Jewish Arts Center, who is skeptical that a recently enacted anti-extremism law will have much effect. "We'll see. We have lots of great laws that aren't enforced."

Kaimovsky sees the exploding signs as a primitive expression -- "on the level of urination" -- of Russians' ingrained negative attitudes toward Jews, who are blamed for everything from the death of the last czar Nicholas II to the Russian Revolution and the country's current economic quagmire.

Kaimovsky has taken a keen interest in anti-Semites since 1999, when he was stabbed 11 times in Moscow's oldest synagogue by a young neo-fascist man. The assailant's background says a lot, Kaimovsky thinks, about the roots of Russian anti-semitism.

"That guy who attacked me was from a good family. His father was a foreign correspondent. He wasn't from a coal miner's family or something," said Kaimovsky, who dismisses poverty as the key factor fueling anti-Semitism. "There is a vacuum of ideas today and so people listen more to these fascist ideas."

The number of outlets for such ideas is shrinking as the government has started this summer to close down extremist publications, in the first crackdown since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Jewish leaders generally praise the response of top Russian government officials to anti-Semitism and support the removal of Russia from the list of countries subject to the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, the 1974 legislation designed to punish the Soviet Union for restricting Jews' emigration.

"President Putin is sending the right message by condemning anti-Semitism and praising Tatyana Sapunova, but, as usual, his expressed wish is at times being sabotaged by lower level officials who really don't care about the safety of the Jewish community," wrote Nickolai Butkevich in an e-mail interview from Washington, where he is the research and advocacy director for the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union.

One of Russia's two chief rabbis, Berl Lazar, also supports lifting Jackson-Vanik which he sees as an inappropriate tool for prodding Russian law enforcement into "making arrests and sending people to trial."

Alekseyeva, whose Moscow Helsinki Committee recently finished a 600-page survey of hate speech in mass-circulation Russian newspapers, said Jews are being reviled less frequently in comparison to the Armenians, Georgians, Azeris and other peoples from the southern reaches of the former Soviet Union. Violence against these peoples is likely to increase, she said.

"They are building xenophobia in the general population," said Alekseyeva, who attributes the trend to Russia's Soviet legacy. "This feeds on the mentality of a totalitarian society. People were raised to always search for an enemy, to always ask: who is to blame?"

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MESSIANIC JEWS' MOVEMENT GROWING IN FORMER SOVIET UNION

ALMATY, Kazakhstan -- Even now, long after he chose Jesus over his wife, Isaak Abayev's voice is colored with anguish when he speaks of the years he spent struggling between what God was telling him and what everyone else expected.

"Everybody rejected me. My wife's family thought I had gone crazy. Other relatives just couldn't understand me because they had always thought of Jesus as the Russian God," Isaak Abayev, 45, a soft-spoken former shoe repairman, whose marriage of 21 years eventually ended.

"Until this very day, some people still think I am lost."

Abayev's problem is simple. He is a Jewish man who, through a series of what he calls divine revelations, came to believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

In the eyes of many traditional Jews, this makes him a heretic and an idolator, taking part in what they sometimes call "The Silent Holocaust."

No matter how controversial, Abayev is not quiet about his new faith. He tells any Jew who will listen that Jesus is first and foremost for them and that Jews may synthesize Jewish and Christian traditions and worship as Messianic Jews.

When Abayev first started gathering in 1998 with other like-minded Jews from a local charismatic Christian congregation here, there were three people, including himself, meeting in private homes. Now, the Beit Shalom Synagogue numbers about 100 and has its own American Messianic pastor.

It is a pattern repeated throughout the former Soviet Union, in Germany and the United States, as dozens of other congregations of Messianic Jews have sprung up among Russian-speaking Jews. They range from a handful of believers in the Kazak cities of Astana and Karaganda to over 1,000 in Ukraine's capital, at Kiev's Jewish Messianic Congregation.

Although no one has reliable figures, in the 10 years since the collapse of communism, Messianic Judaism has spread quickly among Soviet Jews, who are largely ignorant about the faith of their fathers and, in keeping with communist teaching, often consider themselves part of an ethnic group, not a religion.

Traditional Jews are alarmed enough at the trend to have launched an anti-messianic organization in Moscow. With offices in four Soviet cities, the Magen David League, headed by Rabbi Alexander Lakshin, employs 17 people who wage an informational war against Messianic Jews.

"We simply provide the information that the religion that the Messianic Jews promote has nothing to do with Judaism," said Lakshin, adding that he has recently been getting complaints from rabbis in the eastern reaches of the former Soviet Union. "We are planning to expand our activities to Central Asia in the nearest future."

Kazakhstan's Messianic Jewish leaders are ready, saying that the days of easy evangelizing are long gone anyway. "Rabbi" Jeffrey, the American
leader of the Beit Shalom synagogue, contrasted today's situation with his arrival seven years ago in the former Soviet Union.

"I saw more Jewish people make professions of faith, answer the altar call, in one night than in 10 years of working in America. Thousands responded in a positive way," said the pastor, who asked that his last name not be used out of a fear -- legitimate -- of being refused the Israeli citizenship for which he plans to apply.

"These people were not inoculated from the gospel. Now, the Chabad (Lubavitch) have given them their injections," he said, referring to the ultra-Orthodox Jewish group with which the Magen David League and Almaty's synagogue are associated.

The city has an estimated 10,000 Jews with another 5,000 scattered around Kazakhstan, a nominally Muslim country of 14 million between Russia and China. The vast majority of Jews are not religious, much less Messianic. But every Saturday evening in a rented hall here pastor Jeffrey plugs away, staking Jews' claim on Christianity.

"My whole life, when I heard about the New Testament, I thought it was their book, the book of the gentiles," the Brooklyn-raised pastor preached recently to an attentive congregation of about 100. "Then I realized that it was my book."

"I used to think that St. Paul was a Catholic, that all these saints were Christians, not Jewish," he continued, pacing back and forth and zeroing in on the scriptural basis of that evening's lively sermon: Paul's letter to the Romans.

In a later interview, Jeffrey expounded on the theme, explaining how he often uses Paul's teaching to justify the need of Messianic congregations to evangelical Christian leaders who see the Jews as just another ethnic group to be converted.

"I try to teach them that in Romans where it says 'the gospel is for the Jew first' is just as valid today as it was in the first century," he said, adding that he also struggles to explain why Messianic Jews need to preserve traditional Jewish elements including the use of some Hebrew, the wearing of prayer shawls and keeping major holidays like Passover and Rosh Hashanah.

"Jews just aren't comfortable with church for the most part," said Jeffrey, recalling the period after his own conversion in 1975 at the age of 24 in New York City. "I didn't feel comfortable going to church. ... Being in a building with a big cross and a choir was just totally alien."

Abayev noted the pains the congregation's leaders take in cultivating a Jewish atmosphere that won't jar the first-time visitor.

"Even if someone comes from another church, we explain to them, 'Please take your cross off. This is a Jewish synagogue. If a Jew sees that here, he won't understand,'" Abayev said.

Abayev said he is ultimately headed for Israel, where one of his three sons is in the Israeli Army.

"I want to live with my people and tell them about the Messiah," he said.

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Wednesday, December 11, 2002

Propaganda, Ignorance Fuel Religious Repression in Belarus

MOSCOW -- One morning late in November the Rev. Dmitry Podlobko arrived at his small Church of the Living Faith to find that vandals had destroyed the church's sign and wooden fence. It wasn't the first time the Pentecostal church in Gomel, Belarus, had been targeted. And, Podlobko says, it won't be the last time. In fact, the 27-year-old pastor says, he and his flock of 150 are bracing themselves for worse as draconian new religion law takes effect in Belarus, the former Soviet republic known as Europe's last dictatorship.

"Today, a drunk might tear down a fence or throw a rock through our window. Tomorrow, God forbid, drunks might take clubs and attack our parishioners," Podlobko said in a telephone interview the day after the Nov. 26 vandalism.

"I think it is a result of all the anti-church propaganda. Just this week there was a long, negative article in the government newspaper Respublika about charismatic and Pentecostal churches. People read this stuff. It has an effect on them," says Podlobko.

Propaganda, ignorance and Soviet-ingrained suspicions of religions other than the dominant Russian Orthodox Church mean that Belarusians often know little about the country's fast growing Protestant minority. Podlobko says there is a widespread belief that charismatic Christians engage in human sacrifice.

A Baptist pastor in the capital Minsk, Dmitry Lazuta, observes, "A lot of people think that we drink blood, that we sacrifice children. I would think that half of the population thinks this. ... The term 'Baptist' is a scary word here."

In this environment, the country's estimated 100,000 evangelical Protestants are especially nervous that the new religion law will be used to legitimize and expand what had been unofficial discrimination against minority faiths -- from Jews to Roman Catholics to dissident Orthodox Christians.

In principle, the law is designed to protect Belarus' 10 million citizens from dangerous religious cults. In practice, the law buttresses the dominant position of the Russian Orthodox Church through a series of restrictions ranging from a requirement that legal congregations have more than 20 people to a ban on group prayer in private homes.

This last requirement is especially disruptive for Protestant congregations that rely heavily on home Bible study to engage believers between Sunday services. A Pentecostal missionary from Amarillo, Texas, who works for a secular charity in Minsk says the rule on home prayer makes her especially vulnerable.

"You never know until you get a knock on the door," says the woman,
who asked not to be identified. "We assemble more than the law says we can assemble. I have ladies prayer in my home. You never know what will happen ... I get my marching orders from my father in heaven. If he sees fit that I am kicked out of the country, then there are disciples here who will continue."

The number of Western Protestant missionaries working openly in Belarus appears to have dwindled into the single digits as authoritarian president Alexander Lukashenko, a fan of Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin, has steadily cracked down on dissent, free speech and foreign influence.

Roman Catholics, however, rely heavily on the scores of foreign men, mostly Poles, who account for more than half the clergy serving Belarus' 600,000-strong Roman Catholic minority. The new law threatens their presence in the country by requiring all foreign religious workers to get special government permission every year. The country's Catholic hierarchy, however, chose not to oppose the law, much to the dismay of at least two Catholic factory workers who staged a two-man Nov. 8 protest in Minsk and were arrested.

The laymen, who face up to 15 days in prison if convicted of unlawful assembly, were the first believers of any denomination to protest the new law, a fact one of them attributed to a sense of futility and a general passivity that is reflected by religious leaders.

"Our church administration and the bishops are also very passive. Maybe they are also afraid," says Igor Zakrevski by telephone from his home in Borisov outside Minsk.

The leader of one of the country's largest non-Orthodox congregations, the Rev. Vasily Moskalenko of the 1,500-member Pentecostal Grace of Christ Church in Minsk, says protest is useless. "For what? Why do we need it today?," he asks. "We need to learn how to live with this. This is my opinion. Most people are in a panic, but I don't think this helps. We need to see what God brings."

So far, the new law is serving mainly to add to Belarus' growing reputation as a bastion of nuttiness. Spurned in his attempt in November to join world leaders at the NATO summit in Prague, Lukashenko threatened to unleash narcotics and migrant workers on Europe from his country, which borders Poland and Lithuania. Subsequently, the United States and all the European Union nations except for Portugal forbade Lukashenko from visiting.

That leaves Belarus with its principal ally as Russia, where Lukashenko has cordial relations with president Vladimir Putin and a seemingly warmer relationship with the ailing head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Alexy II.

The 80-million member Russian Orthodox Church benefits the most from the new law which has a clause denying government registration to religious associations that were not recognized by the staunchly atheist
Soviet government in 1982 or earlier. Back then, Russian Orthodoxy was also the favored faith, albeit one on a tight leash. Orthodox Church leaders backed the new law, as does the head of a Minsk human rights organization associated with the church, Andrei Aleshko.

"Thanks to this law, our citizens will be better protected from totalitarian sects," says OZON director Aleshko, who identifies "dangerous cults" as including the already banned Scientologists and the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon. While the law will help the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus, it almost certainly will hinder the work of the tiny Belarussian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. That church's leader in Belarus, the Rev. Yan Spasyuk, said he is working with Protestants to work out a strategy for coping with the law.

"The Protestants have a lot more experience. They were underground for many years," Spasyuk said during a recent visit to Moscow. Spasyuk's 300-member parish in the village of Pahranichny, located less than a mile from the Polish border, is still reeling from the Aug. 1 demolition by government bulldozers of its brick church constructed on Spasyuk's property -- allegedly over a building code violation. Spasyuk is heartened, though, by what he says is the decision by three Russian Orthodox parishes in the Brest area to switch over to his church. With the full implications of the new law not clear, Spasyuk called the parishioners' move "a very brave step."

###
Russian Orthodox Will Plant First Orthodox Church in Antarctica

MOSCOW -- Two priests, a four-man choir, a Siberian architect and a devout businessman set off from here Sunday (Jan. 20) for Antarctica to start work on the frozen continent's first Russian Orthodox church. "With God's help it is going forward," said businessman Pyotr Zadirov, 46, as he attended a Sunday morning liturgy hours before departing on the eight-day journey. "Maybe it is not moving as quickly as we would like, but it is moving forward."

Zadirov, head of the Moscow-based Anteks-Polus firm that provides airborne logistical support to the Arctic and Antarctic, is the driving force and main sponsor of the plan to build a small wooden Orthodox church next to a 25-person Russian government scientific station. With the requisite blessing of Russian Orthodox leader Patriarch Alexii II, Zadirov aims to memorialize the 62 Russians who have died on Antarctica and provide a base for a full-time priest for scientists stationed there.

"Russians are the ones who opened up Antarctica and they are the ones who died there in the greatest numbers," said Zadirov, a pensive man with a humble manner who lost five men two years ago when a company helicopter crashed on Antarctica.

Were it not for 70 years of atheistic Communist rule, Zadirov believes Russia would long ago have joined the United States and Chile in building a church or chapel for believers. "It is a real drawback that we don't have a church," Zadirov said.

"Now, at least, our men will have some kind of choice when they are feeling stress. They can choose the bottle -- vodka, which they've always had, or they can go to the church to have a discussion with the priest, or just to cry a little."

Zadirov's group hopes to reach the Bellingshausen station, located on King George Island in the Antarctic Peninsula, sometime between Jan. 23 and Jan. 25 on a Chilean C-130 military transport plane. Once there, they will stay just a few hours, long enough for Father Georgy Ilin, another priest and the choir to hold a memorial service for the dead, plant a large wooden cross and bless the land on which the future Church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker will sit.

Meanwhile, architect Pyotr Anisiforov will be checking out the site for the church, which is already being assembled of Altai Cedar in Anisiforov's native Siberia. "We chose this wood because it won't rot there. There is no bacteria," said Anisiforov in a telephone interview from Barnaul, Siberia, before departing.

Anisiforov said the structure, which somewhat resembles a lighthouse, will measure 30-feet-by-12-feet and soar 36 feet high, a design settled upon for its ability to withstand winds that rage up to
50 meters a second. Anisiforov said he is accustomed to working in extreme cold in his hometown of Barnaul, where winter temperatures dip to -58 degrees fahrenheit. On the day of the group's departure, Bellingshausen reported temperatures around 32 degrees, typical for the Antarctic summer.

Zadirov's plan is to assemble the church in Siberia, disassemble it and then ship it in a container on a Russian cargo ship to Bellingshausen.

If all goes well, he said, the church will be up by the end of the year at a cost not exceeding $100,000. Ilin, the abbot of a monastery near Orenburg, Russia built with Zadirov's money, is in charge of staffing the church with clergy. Priests will likely be rotated on an annual basis and initially live with Bellingshausen's Russian scientists, Zadirov said.

Ilin, a 62-year-old monk, is familiar with the Antarctic, having worked for years on Soviet freighters that supplied research stations there, said Nadezhda Silanteva, a Moscow-based fund-raiser for the project. She said Ilin was unavailable for an interview and generally avoids contact with journalists.

Aside from tending to the spiritual needs of the station's crew and any of the 12,000 annual Antarctic tourists who may visit Bellingshausen, Silanteva said the priest will conduct "a daily service where the dead will be commemorated."

Earlier this year, it looked as though Russia's Antarctic operations, which once rivaled those of the United States, might be shut down completely by a Russian government looking to cut costs. After a public debate last fall, funds were found and Russian government leaders vowed to at least keep Bellingshausen open. Feelings of wounded pride over Russia's swift descent from superpower status give such debates a deep resonance.

Zadirov, who worked in Antarctica as a parachute tester at the height of the Soviet program, sees the small wooden church as a sign of change.

"It is a symbol of the rebirth of faith in Russia and of Russia itself," he said, adding, "And I mean faith, not just Orthodoxy."

Zadirov, the project leader, said that once the church is up and running, he would like to organize the recovery and proper burial of the 62 deceased, who are scattered over at least six different locations on the continent.

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