KREMLIN RULES

At Expense of All Others, Putin Picks a Church

James Hill for The New York Times

A FAVORED FAITH Archbishop Ioann, center, the chief Russian Orthodox priest in the Belgorod region, at a service in Stary Oskol last month. The Russian Orthodox church, which was widely persecuted under Communism, has grown in size and influence since the fall of the Soviet Union. More Photos >

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STARY OSKOL, Russia — It was not long after a Methodist church put down roots here that the troubles began.

First came visits from agents of the F.S.B., a successor to the K.G.B., who evidently saw a threat in a few dozen searching souls who liked to huddle in cramped apartments to read the Bible and, perhaps, drink a little tea. Local officials then labeled the church a "sect." Finally, last month, they shut it down.

There was a time after the fall of Communism when small Protestant congregations blossomed here in southwestern Russia, when a church was almost as easy to set up as a general store. Today, this industrial region has become emblematic of the suppression of religious freedom under President Vladimir V. Putin.

Just as the government has tightened control over political life, so, too, has it intruded in matters of faith. The Kremlin's surrogates in many areas have turned the Russian Orthodox Church into a de facto official religion, warding off other Christian denominations that seem to offer the most significant competition for worshipers. They have all but banned proselytizing by Protestants and discouraged Protestant worship through a variety of harassing measures, according to dozens of interviews with government officials and religious leaders across Russia.

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This close alliance between the government and the Russian Orthodox Church has become a defining characteristic of Mr. Putin's tenure, a mutually reinforcing choreography that is usually described here as working "in symphony."

Mr. Putin makes frequent appearances with the church's leader, Patriarch Aleksei II, on the Kremlin-controlled national television networks. Last week, Mr. Putin was shown prominently accepting an invitation from Aleksei II to attend services for Russian Orthodox Easter, which is this Sunday.

The relationship is grounded in part in a common nationalistic ideology dedicated to restoring Russia's might after the disarray that followed the end of the Soviet Union. The church's hostility toward Protestant groups, many of which are based in the United States or have large followings there, is tinged with the same anti-Western sentiment often voiced by Mr. Putin and other senior officials.

The government's antipathy also seems to stem in part from the Kremlin's wariness toward independent organizations that are not allied with the government.

Here in Stary Oskol, 300 miles south of Moscow, the police evicted a Seventh-day Adventist congregation from its meeting hall, forcing it to hold services in a ramshackle home next to a construction site. Evangelical Baptists were barred from renting a theater for a Christian music festival, and were not even allowed to hand out toys at an orphanage. A Lutheran minister said he moved away for a few years because he feared for his life. He has returned, but keeps a low profile.

On local television last month, the city's chief Russian Orthodox priest, who is a confidant of the region's most powerful politicians, gave a sermon that was repeated every few hours. His theme: Protestant heretics.

"We deplore those who are led astray — those Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, evangelicals, Pentecostals and many others who cut Christ's robes like bandits, who are like the soldiers who crucified Christ, who ripped apart Christ's holy coat," declared the priest, the Rev. Aleksei D. Zorin.

Such language is familiar to Protestants in Stary Oskol, who number about 2,000 in a city of 225,000.

The Rev. Vladimir Pakhomov, the minister of the Methodist church, recalled a warning from an F.S.B. officer to one of his parishioners: " 'Protestantism is facing difficult times — or maybe its end.' "

Most Protestant churches are required under the law to register with the government in order to do anything more than conduct prayers in an apartment. Officials rejected Mr. Pakhomov's registration this year, first saying his paperwork was deficient, then contending that the church was a front for an unspecified business.

Mr. Pakhomov appealed in court, but lost. He said he could now face arrest for so much as chatting with children about attending a Methodist camp.

"They have made us into lepers to scare people away," Mr. Pakhomov said. "There is this climate that you can feel with your every cell: 'It's not ours, it's American, it's alien; since it's alien we cannot expect anything good from it.' It's ignorance, all around."

Yuri I. Romashin, a senior city official, said the denial of the Methodist church's

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registration was appropriate, explaining that the government had to guard against suspicious organizations that used religion as a cover.

“Their goal was not a holy and noble one,” he said of Mr. Pakhomov’s church.

Mr. Romashin said the government did not discriminate against Protestants. “We have to create conditions so that we do not infringe upon their right in any way to their religion and their freedom of conscience,” he said.

Yet, like many Russian officials, he referred to Protestant churches with the derogatory term “sects.”

Religious Intolerance

The limits on Russia’s Protestants — roughly 2 million in a total population of 142 million — have by no means reached those that existed under the officially atheistic Soviet Union, which brutally suppressed religion. And churches in some regions say they have not experienced major difficulties.

The Russian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and Mr. Putin has often spoken against discrimination. “In modern Russia, tolerance and tolerance for other beliefs are the foundation for civil peace, and an important factor for social progress,” he said at a meeting of religious leaders in 2006.

Mr. Putin has also denounced anti-Semitism. While many Jews have emigrated over the past two decades, the Jewish population — now a few hundred thousand people — is experiencing something of a rebirth here.

Anti-Semitism has not disappeared. But in some regions it seems to have been supplanted by anti-Protestantism and, to a lesser extent, anti-Catholicism.

Mikhail I. Odintsov, a senior aide in the office of Russia’s human rights commissioner, who was nominated by Mr. Putin, said most of the complaints his office received about religion involved Protestants.

Mr. Odintsov listed the issues: “Registration, reregistration, problems with property illegally taken away, problems with construction of church buildings, problems with renovations, problems with ministers coming from abroad, problems with law enforcement, usually with the police. Problems, problems, problems and more problems.”

“In Russia,” he said, “there isn’t any significant, influential political force, party or any form of organization that upholds and protects the principle of freedom of religion.”

This absence looms especially large at the regional level. At the request of a Russian Orthodox bishop, prosecutors in the western region of Smolensk shut down a Methodist church last month, supposedly for running a tiny Sunday school without an educational license. The church’s defenders noted that many churches and other religious groups in Russia ran religious schools without licenses and had never been prosecuted.

The F.S.B. has been waging a battle across Russia against Jehovah’s Witnesses. In Nizhny Novgorod, in the nation’s center, the local Jehovah’s Witnesses have had to cancel religious events at least a dozen times in the last few months after the F.S.B. threatened owners of meeting halls, the church’s members said.

In February, some officials in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, Russia’s third largest, proposed creating a commission to combat what it called “totalitarian sects.” The governor of the Tula region, near Moscow, charged that American military intelligence was using Protestant “sects” to infiltrate Russia.

Officials do not say precisely which groups they are referring to, but Protestant ministers say the epithet is so widespread that most Russians assume the speakers mean all Protestants.

The term has clearly seeped into the public's consciousness.

"As a Russian Orthodox believer, I am against the sects," said Valeriya Gubareva, a retired teacher, who was asked about Protestants as she was leaving a Russian Orthodox church here. "Our Russian Orthodox religion is inviolable, and it should not be shaken."

Like other parishioners interviewed, Ms. Gubareva said she supported freedom of religion.

A New Identity

While church attendance in Russia is very low, polls show that Russians are embracing Russian Orthodoxy as part of their identity. In one recent poll, 71 percent of respondents described themselves as Russian Orthodox, up from 59 percent in 2003.

There are a few hundred thousand Roman Catholics in Russia, and the Russian Orthodox Church has had tense relations with the Vatican, accusing Catholic missionaries of trying to convert Russians. The Vatican says it seeks only to reach out to existing Catholics.

The Russian government has often refused visas for foreign Catholic priests, whom the Vatican has sent because there are few Russian ones.

Russia has far more Muslims than Protestants or Catholics — anywhere from 7 million to 20 million, depending on how religious observance is measured. But the Russian Orthodox Church regards Islam as far less likely to lure converts.

There have been considerable numbers of Protestants in Russia since the second half of the 18th century. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Protestant faiths in the West saw Russia as fertile territory and spent heavily to send missionaries to help the existing worshipers and to convert others.

But the Russian Orthodox Church, which was widely persecuted under Communism, was rebuilding and worried about losing adherents.

A backlash ensued. In 1997, under President Boris N. Yeltsin, the first major federal law was enacted restricting Protestant churches and missionaries, requiring many of them to register with the government. But Mr. Yeltsin had a far more ambivalent relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church than does Mr. Putin, and in the chaos of the times the laws were not always enforced.

Under Mr. Putin, who has worn a cross and talked publicly about his faith, the government has added regulations, and laws have often been enforced more stringently or, some Protestants say, capriciously.

For its part, the church, with its links to the czars, has conferred legitimacy on Mr. Putin by championing his rule as he has consolidated power and battered the opposition. In December, after Mr. Putin selected his close aide, Dmitri A. Medvedev, as his successor as president, Aleksei II extolled the decision on national television. Mr. Medvedev, who takes office on May 7, easily won election last month.

Aleksandr Fedichkin, a leader of the Russian Evangelical Alliance, which represents many Protestant churches, said governors, who are appointed by Mr. Putin, regularly deferred to Russian Orthodox bishops.

"Many times, officials say to us, 'Please, you must ask the Orthodox bishop about your activity, and if he agrees, then you can work here,' " Mr. Fedichkin said.

Asked about such complaints, Dmitri S. Peskov, a Kremlin spokesman, said Protestants had made impressive strides in Russia, with the number of officially registered religious organizations in the country having increased nearly fivefold, to more than 23,000, in recent years. Many of those, he said, were Protestant.

"First of all, all religions are treated on an equal basis," Mr. Peskov said. "But at the same

time, we have to keep in mind that the Russian Orthodox Church is the leading church in Russia, it's the most popular church in Russia."

He added, "Speaking about violations in terms of Protestants or others, about possible complaints, it's very hard to draw any trends."

He recommended seeking the views of Bishop Sergei V. Ryakhovsky, head of the Pentecostal Union, whom Mr. Putin appointed to the Public Chamber, a Kremlin advisory council.

Bishop Ryakhovsky said in an interview that while the Kremlin voiced support for tolerance, the situation at the regional level was troubling. Little if anything was being done, he said, to help Protestant churches that are routinely barred by officials from obtaining space for services. Nor, he said, did the Kremlin seem interested in discouraging Russian Orthodox clergy members from attacking Protestants.

"These questions, like construction and obtaining plots of land, are deeply problematic all over Russia," he said. "The issue is not some particular regions or provinces. I am like a firefighter, and I have to rush to different areas of the country, to find ways to establish a dialogue with the authorities."

The Grip of Orthodoxy

Here in southwestern Russia, the Belgorod region, traditionally a stronghold of Russian Orthodoxy, has been at the forefront of the anti-Protestant campaign.

In 2001, during Mr. Putin's first term, the region enacted a law to drastically restrict Protestant proselytizing. More recently, it mandated that all public school children take what is essentially a Russian Orthodox religion course. A guide for teachers of young children recommends that schools have religious rooms with portraits of Jesus Christ, Russian Orthodox icons and other sacred items.

The regional governor, Yevgeny Savchenko, who calls himself a Russian Orthodox governor, declined to be interviewed for this article.

Archbishop Ioann, the chief Russian Orthodox priest in the Belgorod region, said Russians had a deep connection to Orthodoxy that the government should nurture. "In essence, we have begun to live through a period that is like the second Baptism of Russia, just as there was before the Baptism of ancient Russia," he said, referring to Russia's adoption of Christianity in the year 988.

He said the church wanted warm ties with other faiths, though it was hard to overlook the foreign connections of Protestants. "You know, what else alarms me, the majority of them are born — I must apologize, but I will tell the truth — from the West's money," he said. "Naturally, they need to play the role of the offended ones who need protection."

The archbishop denied that the church disparaged Protestants.

"In our sermons, you will never hear us trying to condemn them or say that they do anything wrong," he said.

In fact, on the day the archbishop was being interviewed, local television was repeatedly showing the sermon of his deputy, Father Zorin, likening Protestants to those who killed Jesus Christ.

The Protestant churches here say they are left alone by the authorities only if they keep their activities behind closed doors. And so it was that on a recent weekend, clusters of Protestants made their way to whatever gathering spots they could find.

The Lutheran pastor, the Rev. Sergei Matyukh, held a service in a small apartment with his Methodist colleague, Mr. Pakhomov, as a show of support. Many at the service said that what most bothered them was that the officials who harassed them once professed loyalty to Communism, and had switched to Russian Orthodoxy.

"The power holders, they are, as a rule, atheists," said Gennadi Safonov, who works in marketing. "They have adopted a fashion or a trend."

One of the few Protestant groups with a permanent base is the Evangelical Baptists, who in the relative freedom of the early 1990s were able to obtain a sturdy building that seats several hundred people. They have been allowed to stay, though they say they would not be permitted to find other space.

Protestants here must receive official permission before doing anything remotely like proselytizing. The Rev. Vladimir Kotenyov, a Baptist minister, said his church had given up asking.

"Naturally, it will be perceived as propaganda directed at our population," Mr. Kotenyov said. " 'What kind of propaganda are you preaching?' they would ask. 'An American faith?' "

"This is how they think: If you are a Russian person, it means that you have to be Russian Orthodox."

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