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ATOMIZATION, DECENTRALIZATION AND SUSTAINABILITY PROMINENT TRENDS ON THE RUSSIAN PROTESTANT CHURCH SCENE

By William Yoder

Bill Yoder, a US-born citizen from Florida, has resided in Europe most of the time since 1971 - in Russia since 2001. Yoder is a long-term writer on church affairs; his primary topic – until the Wall fell – was the German Democratic Republic. After residency in Moscow and Belarus, he and his wife moved, after his retirement, to Russia’s Kaliningrad region in 2018. His Ph.D. in political science is from the “Free University of (West) Berlin”, 1991. He is an Advisory Editor of OPREE and a frequent contributor.

As with big, pre-1990 Yugoslavia, the million-member, Soviet-era Union of Evangelical-Christians and Baptists is still dissolving into its many parts. And the Union’s original “mother”, the Russian Baptist Union, may now have no more than 70.000 members. It could be compared with Yugoslavia’s old core: Serbia. A tiny Serbia too is still around, but it is only a shadow of its former self. Russia now exhibits a great diversity of old and new denominations. A few of them, *Izkhod* (Exodus) for ex., are very much a result of the post-1990 climate. The majority of *Izkhod’s* members are former substance abusers. Pentecostal congregations contain many “cultural outsiders,” retired Army officers, for ex., who have come to the faith since 1990.

Today, bishops and central church offices have less and less to say. Decentralization is the key; movement is generally away from the center and towards the fringe. This trend is due in part to past foreign funding for individual projects, and the greatly increased crowd of immigrants in the West expecting a say in the governance of congregational affairs back in their homeland.

At least in Russia—and China—the age of euphoria prominent 30 years ago is gone. The church missions committed to short-term gains have left for greener pastures and the congregations remaining behind are now, more than ever, required to determine their own fates.

Increasingly required to live from their own funding, church projects are becoming more sustainable. Huge building and educational projects are only a memory. This general and expected course of events can be attributed in part to short attention spans in the West; increased government pressure is only one of numerous factors.

Russia's Evangelical Alliance Is Back on the Public Stage

Good things are happening for interconfessional relationships in Russia. For the first time in four years, representatives of all of Russia's leading evangelical denominations attended a session of the Moscow-based "Advisory Council for the Heads of the Protestant Churches of Russia" on 23 September 2019. Most significant was the presence of top leadership from the "Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists" (RUECB) – both President Peter Mitskevich and his deputy, Viktor Ignatenko, attended. Citing differences with Bishop Sergey Ryakhovsky of the "Associated Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical-Pentecostal Faith" (ROSKhVE), the Baptist Union had broken ties with the Advisory Council on 23 September 2015. (See our release from 7 October 2015.) The Baptist Union has not rejoined the Council, but talks are finally underway. The chances of Russian Protestantism having the opportunity to speak with a single voice, once again, are increasing.

Official talks between the 2003-founded "Russian Evangelical Alliance" (hereafter REA) and the Baptist Union took place on 26 September 2019. The REA is now accepted as a full member of the Advisory Council and was present for the conversations with the Baptist Union three days previous.

The Alliance was also present at the Sixth Plenum of "Christian Inter-Confessional Advisory Committee for the CIS-Countries and Baltics" at Moscow's prestigious "President's Hotel" on 30 October. This body, whose forum meets biannually, is a kind of Russian alternative to the Geneva-based "World Council of Churches." Its three heads are Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant. The Protestants are currently represented by the Lutheran Archbishop Dietrich Brauer. Vitaly Vlasenko, who once held the Protestant chair on this committee, attended for the Russian Evangelical Alliance.

This upsurge in REA-activity is due in part to Vitaly Vlasenko's appointment as its global ambassador in 2017. He has visited numerous countries since then, including China and, most recently, Georgia and Armenia. Vlasenko, once head of the Baptist Union's Office for External

Affairs, is now also serving as the “European Evangelical Alliance’s” representative to the Orthodox churches. Alexander Fedichkin and Sergey Vdovin remain the REA’s president and general secretary, respectively. The REA was also involved in conversations with Doug Burleigh, head of Washington’s “National Prayer Breakfast” movement, in Moscow on 16 October.

In the current atmosphere of heightened state pressure emanating from the Yarovaya Laws of 2016, situations have come about on the regional level in which individual Protestant denominations have attempted to curry favor with the state at the expense of others. The REA very much discourages such ventures – evangelical solidarity is the official course.

Government examination of Moscow’s numerous Protestant seminaries continues. Seminaries are operating, but only “Moscow Seminary of Evangelical-Christians” headed by Alexander Tsitserov and “Moscow Theological Institute” (Sergey Yastrzhembsky, Rector) presently enjoy state accreditation. MTI belongs to the historical Pentecostal denomination headed by Eduard Grabovenko: the “Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith” (RTsKhVE). Heavy hitters like the RUECB- and ROSKhVE-seminaries are operating without state accreditation.

The Demise of Moscow’s “Russian-American Christian University”

I’m still struck with sadness when recalling the makeshift monument erected in 2007 about 40 meters from the entrance to Moscow’s “Russian-American-Institute.” Its plaque stated that the monument was dedicated to “protection from the enemies of the Russian soil.” At least 15 demonstrations took place at the site in the four years prior to completion of the building in 2010. In the end, Russian taxes and US debt killed the project which led to the building’s purchase by a secular Russian firm in March 2014. Founded in 1995, the institution was known as the “Russian-American Christian University” (RACU) until November 2007.

What caused such a negative reaction within the Russian nation? After all, in October 1990 upper echelons of the Gorbachev-government had invited evangelical educators to start a liberal arts university on Russian soil. It was a Russian proposal, not an American one, and it was the Russians who gradually reneged on their invitation.

A book by the project’s primary mover-and-shaker, John Bernbaum, is entitled *Opening the Red Door* and was published by Intervarsity Press in 2019. The book is a documentary, not

an intellectual enterprise, and makes no real effort to answer the above question. Allow me to try.

Reason #1: Too Big and Too Different

Such a project at the country's Moscow epicentre was too big, too visible and too Western to survive a serious downturn in US-Russian relations. One could claim that, in view of East-West tensions, not even St. Peter could have kept the project afloat. To believe otherwise would have meant defying the laws of gravity. In addition: Russia's less-than-a-million evangelicals were in no position to support, both financially and intellectually, a multi-confessional project of these dimensions. In Europe there is no tradition of privately owned, Christian liberal arts universities. Intellectual centers of learning are a luxury never enjoyed by Russian Protestants. Russian evangelical support for the project was very modest: its strongest supporter was the neo-Pentecostal "Associated Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical-Pentecostal Faith" (ROSKhVE).

In 2014, Ruslan Nadyuk (or Nadiuk), the long-term head of RACU's social work department, insisted, "Most (Russian) Protestants do not want professional programs. They view education strictly as an instrument for evangelism." Yet Protestants restricting themselves to evangelism, "will in time reduce themselves to little groups capable only of converting their offspring." He added that the anti-intellectualism in his realm is fueled by Western fundamentalists, insisting that the study of psychology is an anti-Christian endeavor.

RACU was a welcome source of capital and jobs to Russian Protestants, but a sense of ownership did not develop. As I wrote in 2014, "[t]o Protestants, this institution appeared worthy of exploitation, but not of sustenance. The unfed cow was milked until she expired." The reservations of provincial, conservative church circles regarding a liberal arts education is also par-for-the-course in North America. In the Russian context, such graduates usually end up as Charismatics or Orthodox or even as residents of the West. A vital first step would involve touting the fruits of involvement in intellectual topics among the old-time faithful.

Reason #2: Not Meeting Russians on Equal Terms

In Russia, by far the world's largest country in territorial terms, such an international project can only succeed if local government and church authorities feel they are truly equal partners. Despite the very best of intentions, those paying the piper will also determine the tune, and Russia's Protestants were absolutely incapable – and the government unwilling – to supply

50% of the funding. It was a Catch-22 situation: the money was not there to insure equal treatment, and without equal treatment, the project was doomed. Even RACU's P.R. work in Russia was headed by a US marketing firm.

After 1990, and perhaps even today, Russia had long wanted – or even still, wants – positive relations with the West. But that desire is not unconditional, very much in contrast to the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine. Smaller countries are accustomed to being junior partners and do accept orders arriving from above. The survival of Protestant university projects in Lithuania and Ukraine can be attributed in part to this readiness. The tiny minority of Russian Protestants frequently does not mind being a junior partner –but its government certainly does.

Those projects still surviving in Russia are, despite their names, essentially seminaries or Bible schools. Two of them are “St. Petersburg Christian University” and Krasnodar’s “Kuban Evangelical-Christian University.” They are more modest, less-invasive endeavors – and not located anywhere near the nation’s capital.

Reason #3: Conflicting Worldviews

Being “too Western” demands an explanation. The author is struck by the drastic gap between Bernbaum’s description of recent Russian history and the views prominent within Russia. Bernbaum inverts the heroes and villains; he does not deny the human foibles of Boris Yeltsin, but his “heroes,” Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev, are viewed as villains by today’s Russians. Gorbachev, regarded as the annihilator of the USSR’s economy, has popularity ratings hovering pathetically around 1%.

Vladimir Putin is Bernbaum’s nationalist villain. No mention is made of Putin’s openness for a free trading zone reaching from Lisbon to Vladivostok, or his remarkable address to Germany’s Bundestag on 25 September 2001. He had then appealed for broad German-Russian cooperation while speaking of, “all-European cooperation between equals.” Putin, not the West, spoke until recently of the other side as “partners.” In Russia, it’s the diehard nationalists who complain about Putin’s softness on the West. Bernbaum does not regard NATO’s encirclement of Russia as a major issue.

Bernbaum describes communism and the communist state essentially as highly-corrupt producers of rubble. Yet the communist state turned an agrarian power into a superpower in the half-century following 1917—and that despite a devastating world war. The legendary Wolfowitz Doctrine of 1992 asserted that the USA should never again tolerate the existence of a second

super power. That paper certainly did regard the USSR as having superpower status. Granted, the USSR never was a superpower in terms of a living standard.

Perhaps evangelical goals are too grandiose. Philip L. Wickeri's classic work from 1988 on the relationship between church and state in Mao's China, *Seeking the Common Ground*, concludes that Christian circles had reconciled themselves to the fact that a church need not own hospitals and schools in order to make an impact. Christians were free as individuals to participate in the social programs of the whole. Thanks in part to this "defeatist" worldview, the Chinese church grew from 2.5 to roughly 50-70 million in the 50 years after 1949. Granted, educational deficiencies remain a trademark of the current Chinese church.

According to Wickeri's *Seeking the Common Ground* missionaries had a "pre-packaged understanding" of the truth, which rendered them incapable of genuine encounter with those around them (Wickeri, 35). "The scandal is not the cross, but the unshaken class and ideological standpoint of the message bearer." Can missionaries be effective without being missionized themselves? Can change only occur if it is mutual? Western and Russian evangelicals would benefit to study Wickeri's book carefully.

Moving on to Kaliningrad: The Baptist "Church of Peace" in Kaliningrad

On festive occasions at Kaliningrad (former Königsberg), Russia's Baptist church, one is reminded of the best of times back in the former USSR. Then, as many as 600 persons crowded into the "Church of Peace," a four-part choir hailed forth and children and women recited poetry and sang. Two or three sermons were to be expected; adult males and children were visible throughout. As many as 500 persons frequently visited the Sunday morning services; roughly 25% of the participants were minors.

This imposing, round church was dedicated in a very festive hour on 23 August 1998. The 700 participants in the Ulitsa Gagarina 18 behind the "King's Gate" in the east of the city then included 100 guests from Germany. Pastor Anatoly Krikun is very pleased to have a "Bible college." This state-recognized institution was founded in 1999 and today boasts in approximately 20 students. Its study program consists of five two-week study blocks held five times annually for a three-year period. Theology and music courses are offered; women are trained as Sunday school teachers. Visiting lecturers from Germany are often present. Thanks largely to the college, a guest house has been built next to the large "prayer house."

Numbers are erratic, but one speaks of 800 to 870 Baptists in Kaliningrad region. Yet the Master's thesis of the Russian-German Alex Breikreuz from 2006 reports on only 426 adult members in registered congregations, 318 of those in Kaliningrad's "Church of Peace." Other small congregations exist in Bagrationovsk, Sovietsk, Gussev, Mamonovo, and Gromovo near Slavsk. The congregation in Sovietsk (Tilsit in German) even has its own building. A second Baptist congregation also exists in the north of Kaliningrad: The gathering in Ulitsa Lomonosov, 54 has roughly 60 members.

Barely noticed are the reclusive and small gatherings of the "*Initiativniki*," the 1961-founded denomination of non-registered, "underground" Baptists. They are present in Kaliningrad as well as in Yasnaya Polyana, which is the once-German "horse paradise" of Trakhenen. Breikreuz reported that the *Initiativniki* could point to as many as 300 members in the enclave in 2004. A Russian-language webpage, "map.drevolife.ru" even lists 11 congregations for them in Kaliningrad region.

In German times, Königsberg had six larger Baptist congregations and was considered a hotbed of Baptist activity. Today, Baptists no longer have access to any church building stemming from German times. According to the Baptist Vadim Lugov, Kaliningrad currently has Protestant congregations meeting at 24 locations.

The first native Russian Baptists arrived in the enclave in 1947—two years after its takeover by the Soviet Union. Interesting is the fact that the Baptists were legally registered as a religious entity in this region many years prior to any other denomination. That occurred in 1967; remarkably 18 years before the registration of the Orthodox Church! This is cited on the congregation's webpage („mir-kld.ru“) as well as in the Master's thesis of Pastor Anatoly Krikun, which was published in 2011. Its title, translated, is: "The History of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Eastern Prussia and Kaliningrad Region."

But only on the third try did the Baptists succeed in dedicating a new, small house of prayer in the city on 12 August 1979. This chapel, the first officially-functioning church in all of the officially-atheist Kaliningrad region, was located at Krylova 38—far removed from any public transportation in the north of the city. This happy situation was due largely to the positive relationship between Y. Y. Makhobaysky, the region's director for religious affairs, and the Baptists. This government official was also present at the building's dedication. Krikun wrote that Makhobaysky had proven to be an "honest and intelligent person. When necessary, he would

stand up for the rights of the believers.” The Roman Catholics and Lutherans were not registered with the state until 1991.

From 1966-76, the Baptists had gathered, far removed from the regional capital, at the private house of its pastor, Pavel Meissner. That was in the village of Pervomaiskaya near the once-German city of Bladiau. Beginning in 1964, large, ethnic-German families from central-Asian Kyrgyzstan had begun to appear in the region. In the mid-70s, 30% of the region’s Baptists were of German origin—a circumstance not pleasing to government authorities. According to Krikun, the arrival of the Russian-Germans produced a heyday for the church lasting from 1976 to 1989. Just before the great exodus began in 1976, the Kaliningrad congregation had 180 adult members.

Pastor Krikun stated in 2002 that his congregation had experienced a virtually 100% replacement of membership during the course of the past three decades. Those kept from emigrating to Germany by an “unsuitable,” non-German pedigree had chosen to try their luck on the other side of the Great Pond. Twenty former members of the Kaliningrad choir were living in the USA by 2002. This is one cause for the suspicion that the arrival of large numbers from the Volga region and the new, central Asian republics during the past 20 years is essentially a repeat of the old strategy of using Kaliningrad as a stepping stone for a move even further westward. That’s an additional cause for sadness: too many believers have both come and gone.

Kaliningrad’s Baptist congregation is clearly conservative in content and style; a number of younger persons have consequently been gravitating towards Pentecostal circles. Yet Krikun adamantly supports the efforts of an Evangelical Alliance. He understands well that Protestants forming a common front vis à vis the government and society has clear advantages. Relationships with Lutheran groups are frequently hearty. Anatoly Ivanovich Krikun, trained as a construction engineer and theologian, was born in Berdichev in the Zhitomir region of Ukraine in 1946. He moved to Kaliningrad in 1967 and was ordained a pastor in 1994. He has been senior pastor (or “bishop”) of the congregation since 1996.

Combining the Old and the New: A New and Youthful Congregation in Kaliningrad

Kaliningrad Pastor Vitaly Alexandrovich Gut wants to combine the old with the new. That’s why he regards his congregation as both Lutheran and Charismatic. His services include lifted hands, a praise team and modern music. Yet his 25-member congregation is not overly-

loud in a negative sense and anyone not choosing to lift their hands during worship is very free to do so. Neither the music nor sermons are loud or emotional.

During the last year, this congregation has begun meeting in the new, yellow Methodist chapel at Allee Suvorova 8a, a kilometer west of the Yuzhny Vokzal train station. Yet Pastor Gut does not desire to be a Methodist. He loves the Lutheran dedication to history, tradition and the sacraments, and holds the continuity of a confession in high regards. “Psychologically, Lutheranism is closest to me,” he insists. “It’s more historical.” Vitaly Gut himself embodies both the old and the new. He has a fresh, friendly and dynamic style; young people are attracted to him. His openness for the charismatic gifts is one aspect of his commitment to the world church as it currently exists. At the same time, he does not approve of women serving in a sacramental role. He shares Russia’s usual rejection of the West’s liberal-humanistic-secular form of Christianity. Therefore, he could be described as a Missouri-Synod or Ingria (Finnish)-Lutheran with an openness for the charismatic.

Russia has approximately five separate Lutheran denominations, and Gut’s congregation is the first Lutheran one in Kaliningrad region which is not a part of the “Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Russia” (ELCR). The ELCR is headed by Archbishop Dietrich Brauer. This congregation is instead a part of the “Evangelical-Lutheran Church of the Augsburg Confession” (ELTsAI in Russian) founded by Moscow’s Vladimir Pudov in 2006. From 1994 until May 2006, Vladimir Pudov, a former Soviet government official born in 1952, had served as the ELCR’s representative for relations with the national government in Moscow. After his retirement, he lived in Kaliningrad from 2015 until he returned to Moscow four years later.

During the crisis year of 2018, the ELTsAI shrank from about 40 to six congregations, now including two in Moscow, and one in Kaliningrad. Pudov believes most of “his” congregations were never accepted for membership within the ELCR because they were seen as insufficiently Lutheran. Indeed, Vladimir Pudov himself dropped out of his church in November 2018 when Moscow’s Pavel Begichev was confirmed in his function as metropolitan of the Old Catholic church without giving up his role as bishop and “General-Ordinarius” of the ELTsAI. In November 2014, Slovakia’s Old Catholic church had signed a partnership agreement with the ELTsAI. That was a breakthrough, for no other confession, not even a Lutheran one, had ever officially recognized the ELTsAI. This move also gave Slovakia’s Old Catholics their first-ever foothold on Russian soil. Vladimir Pudov calls this step nonsense: “How am I to explain to the

Orthodox that an Old Catholic metropolitan is one of our bishops?” Nevertheless, Vitaly Gut is not interested in the rough-and-tumble of church politics and remains a friend of Pudov. He also continues to have a close relationship with Begichev, a former Baptist and Pentecostal, and cherishes the freedom which this hybrid denomination offers. The ELTsAI is registered with the Russian government as a Lutheran denomination.

Pastor Gut was born in 1975 at Gornyak on the Western side of the conflict-ridden Donbass region of Ukraine. His father was a miner and the family consequently moved to Yakutia five years later. From there, the family progressed even further east to the former Gulag colony of Magadan on the Pacific. That’s where the young Vitaly attended the Swedish-Reformed “St. James Bible College,” completing two years of study there in 1996.

After graduation in Magadan, he served in Methodist and Pentecostal congregations in Ural region, mostly in Yekaterinburg and Asbest. He first moved to Kaliningrad in 2003 under US-American “Church of God” auspices. But that effort did not succeed and he returned to Asbest and Yekaterinburg, where he met and married his wife, Nadezhda Yurevna, in 2007. They returned to Kaliningrad together and Vitaly began a house group there in 2013. He was ordained a pastor by the ELTsAI in Moscow two years later.

What are the pastor’s hopes for the future of the congregation? “Our stress is not in the social realm,” he explains. “We seek the face of God; we desire the fruits of the Spirit. We want to be more dedicated to Christ—we are not a social club. We seek the spiritual; we also believe that God heals people.”

Churches Moving Toward the Edge: A One-Time Exception is Becoming the Rule

A significant exodus from Russia’s Baptist Union (RUECB) has been in process ever since the rule of Mikhail Gorbachev. Membership has dropped from over a million to roughly 70,000—due, though, in part to the creation of national churches following the breakup of the USSR. But this has also been accompanied by a movement toward the Union’s edge, without official departure from the denomination.

An initial movement to the edge of the Baptist umbrella occurred very soon after 1990 with the arrival of the conservative Calvinist movement under the auspices of the Illinois-based “Slavic Gospel Association” and the Californian John MacArthur. More liberal—but nevertheless conservative—movements followed. These included groups sponsored by “Kovcheg” (the Ark),

which is not to be confused with the movement founded by the French-Canadian Catholic Jean Vanier in 1964. Another one on the fringe is the “Dom Molitvy dla Vsekh Narodov” (House of Prayer for all Nations), which has groups both under and outside the RUECB’s umbrella. Also known by the abbreviation “IHOP” (not to be confused with the restaurant chain), it was founded in Kansas City in 1999. The Moscow-based “VSEKh” (All-Russian Fellowship of Evangelical-Christians), was founded in 2008 largely by the Baptists Alexander Semchenko and Leonid Kartavenko. Itself an umbrella, a number of its congregations are still partly under the umbrella of the Baptist Union. Vitaly Vlasenko and his Moscow congregation are also ensconced on the fringe of the Union’s umbrella.

Independently-governed theological institutes are particularly populous on the Baptist Union’s fringe. Two of the best known are “St. Petersburg Christian University” and John MacArthur’s large “Samara Center for Biblical Training”.

Perhaps the newest congregation out on the fringe is “Dom Otsa” (The Father’s House - TFH), serving since January 2017 at Raushskaya Naberezhnaya Street, 4/5 in central Moscow. Its leading members include a higher-than-average percentage of people named Sipko. Indeed, one of its founders is Sergey Sipko, the RUECB’s senior vice-president from 2014 to 2018. His father, Yuri Sipko, president of the Baptist Union until 2010, is a frequent visitor and preacher at this church plant. Interestingly, both Sergey Sipko and his predecessor as senior vice-president, Evgeny Bakhmutsky, are active in movements of the fringe of the Baptist Union. But the two are essentially on opposite ends of the fringe, for Bakhmutsky is the leading Russian representative of the MacArthur movement.

The Father’s House founding base now consists of 7,500 members worshipping in five congregations throughout Orange County, California. The movement was founded by Dave and Donna Patterson 30 years ago and describes itself as a “multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-racial church.” Moscow’s The Father’s House even states in its founding creed that it is “a contemporary church; maintaining (traditional) content while being adaptive in its forms.” Contemporary forms combined with friendliness and openness for strangers clearly lower the threshold for newcomers—a major concern for younger, mission-minded Baptists. These movements on the fringe—with the exception of MacArthur’s group—tend to be louder, less male, more international and racially diverse than the average RUECB congregation. Gatherings of

RUECB-pastors, however, remain strictly male with most participants above the age of 50. But Russian Protestantism in general is younger, more diverse and less exclusive than its leadership.

The Father's House's home congregation is located in Vacaville, California, only 56 km (37 miles) west of the Russian-Baptist stronghold at Sacramento. This is very likely one reason for the establishment of a connection to Russia. TFH also has congregations in Irkutsk and Omsk/Siberia, the latter being the home turf of the extended Sipko family. Confusing is the fact that Moscow features a second congregation named "Dom Otsa." That Pentecostal group is headed by Mikhail Dubrovsky and meets at the Pentecostal ROSKhVE's seminary on Porechnaya Ulitsa in south Moscow.

Baptist Union leadership appreciates the fringe's aid in propping up the membership rolls, but relationships and power bases with independent funding are being formed beyond the reach of Union leadership. A covert emigration, an erosion from within, is beckoning. A disguised, slow death is on the boards for the RUECB if it intends to be more than an administrative umbrella. These new quasi-Baptist faces will not be taking their orders from Baptist headquarters. And indeed, if headquarters would attempt to pass out orders, then those on the receiving end realize that the exit door is never far.

Few will say it loudly, but The Father's House appearance is one indication of growing estrangement between the extended Sipko family and current Baptist Union leadership. That estrangement was readily apparent on social networks during 2018. The post-1990 era among the once Soviet churches has become the era of centrifugal forces pushing away from the hub and towards the fringe. Expect this global trend towards decentralization to continue, also in Russia.