

# Russian Baptists denounce smear campaign

February 23, 2009

MOSCOW (ABP) — Russian Baptists denounced the injection of religion into politics after a bogus newspaper circulated in a mayoral race falsely identified a candidate as a Baptist in an effort to besmirch his character.

According to Internet reports, a counterfeit newspaper stuffed into mailboxes in the western Russian city of Smolensk claimed Baptists were supporting a mayoral candidate in hopes that his election would cause Baptists to rival the Russian Orthodox Church for influence.

"Russian Baptists are for Maslakov!" appeared as a banner headline in the supposed special edition of *The Protestant*, presumably forged as a political dirty trick.

The article claimed that Baptists all over Russia and from around the world were hoping candidate Sergy Maslakov "will become the first Baptist mayor in Russia" in the upcoming March 1 election. But Baptist leaders [said](#) Maslakov, one of 10 candidates running for mayor, is largely unknown outside the region and has no known ties to Baptists.



Allegedly bogus  
headline reads  
'Russian Baptists are  
for Maslakov!'  
(RUECB)

The article alluded to rumors of rampant sexual immorality and pedophilia among Baptists, and implied Russian Baptist churches are funded largely by Western sources, including the government of the United States.

"Political con-artists are trying to turn the respected, 140-year history of Baptists in Russia into a horror story in hopes of helping and hurting certain political parties," said Vitaly Vlasenko, the Russian Baptist union's director of external church affairs.

Vlasenko accused campaign workers of "sowing hatred between the [denominational] confessions," an act he termed "ugly and totally unacceptable."

The article reportedly included comments falsely attributed to the head of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists from an interview that did not take place. The paper carried photos of Baptist leaders with mismatched captions that identified them with incorrect names.

Viktor Ignatenkov, pastor of First Baptist Church of Smolensk, told the Slavic Legal Center the candidate has no relationship to Baptists and has never been a member of a Baptist church. He said the anonymous authors apparently intended to inflame irreligious strife with statements about Baptists that are patently false.

Anatoly Pchelintsev, a university professor and chief editor of the *Religion and Law* journal [told](#) Slavic Legal Center that Baptists have never conducted themselves in ways described in the newspaper or interfered in political activity. He joined Russian Baptists in saying law enforcement should investigate who was behind the publication.

Smolensk, with more than 300,000 citizens, is one of Russia's oldest cities and scene of some of the heaviest fighting during World War II. Located on the Dnieper River, it is a port city and important rail junction for distribution of agricultural products and other goods.

It is also hometown of the new Russian Patriarch, Metropolitan Kirill, who supports better relations between the Orthodox Church and other faith groups.

Vlasenko of the Baptist union called the bogus publication a "nasty farewell" and "grievous insult" to the patriarch, who was metropolitan of Smolensk from 1991 to 2008, and said it "besmirches that which it intends to defend: the Russian Orthodox Church."

Tensions between Orthodox leaders and minority faiths are not uncommon in the former Soviet Union. Last year a court in Smolensk [dissolved](#) a Methodist church for having a Sunday school attended by four children, but Russia's Supreme Court later reversed the decision.

The First Baptist Church of Smolensk, on the other hand, was [recognized](#) by the government of Vladimir Putin with a medal recognizing its social ministries.

The International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic, recently sponsored a groundbreaking [conference](#) aimed at improving Baptist-Orthodox relations in European contexts with an Orthodox religious majority.

*-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.*