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RUSSIA: Criminal charges against readers of religious literature

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>), and Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>)

For the first time in Russia to Forum 18 News Service's knowledge, formal criminal charges have been brought against four readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. The four – Aleksei Gerasimov, Fizuli Askarov, Yevgeny Petry and Andrei Dedkov – are accused of violating Article 282.2 Part 1 of the Criminal Code ("organising activity by a banned religious or other association"), which carries a maximum penalty of three years' imprisonment. The association concerned is "Nurdzhular", which Nursi readers insist does not exist. Two Nursi readers in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan, Ziyavdin Dapayev and Ruslan Bulatov, are being investigated under Article 282.2, Part 2 of the Criminal Code ("participation in a banned religious extremist organisation"). Many Russian translations of Nursi's works feature on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, making their distribution a criminal offence.

For the first time in Russia to Forum 18 News Service's knowledge, formal criminal charges have been brought against readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Three of the four were detained for up to 36 hours amid mass raids by the local FSB security service in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk on 16-17 February. Many Russian translations of Nursi's works feature on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, making their distribution a criminal offence.

Aleksei Gerasimov, one of the four Nursi readers, told Forum 18 from Krasnoyarsk on 3 March that it is unclear how long the FSB's investigation will last and when any trial will take place.

Only he and the three others are facing charges, he added, although 20 private homes were raided on the night of 16-17 February. Religious literature was confiscated from all, including Korans and other books as well as Nursi works. In Gerasimov's case, all 14 volumes of Nursi's Koranic commentary "Risale-i Nur" ("Messages of Light") in Turkish and seven books in Russian were confiscated, he told Forum 18.

Strong doubts have been raised about the legality of some literature seizures. Two lawyers working separately on religious freedom cases have told Forum 18 that it is unlawful for the authorities to take religious literature without formally recording this. To continue to hold the literature, the authorities must conduct an investigation which either results in criminal or administrative proceedings, or the literature being handed back (see F18News 5 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1417).

Krasnoyarsk raids

Gerasimov said that state representatives searched his flat "in a proper manner" (see most recently F18News 23 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1412). However, statements viewed by Forum 18 from five others raided claim rougher treatment.

Dated 19 February, Roman Gavrusik's account describes how, after 11pm on 16 February, a masked and armed group burst into a Krasnoyarsk flat where he and other Nursi readers were meeting. The state representatives pushed those present to the floor and forced them to lie face down with their hands behind their heads for some four hours, he writes, also hitting or kicking several even though they offered no resistance. Later taken to the local FSB headquarters, the Nursi readers were made to stand against a wall with their hats covering their faces for two hours. An interrogator threatened Gavrusik with detention, a four-year prison term and harm to his family if he did not admit to leading "some sect": "He also said he had killed people like me in Chechnya".

Statements by Nazim Balamirzoyev, Yevgeny Petry and Yevgeny Tarasov – present at the same raid – concur with Gavrusik's. Balamirzoyev adds that the Nursi readers were sworn at and insulted, including as "terrorists and separatists". Tarasov – who is ethnically Tatar – says he was called a "parasite" and asked: "How can you, a Russian, betray Russia by becoming a Muslim?"

Russian translations of "Risale-i Nur" were controversially banned as extremist by a Moscow court in May 2007 (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981). "Nurdzhular" – which Nursi readers insist does not exist – was banned as an extremist organisation by the Supreme Court in April 2008 (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136). Countering the claims of Nursi critics in Russia that his work is banned in

Turkey, a top Turkish religious affairs official stated in March 2007 that the 14 books of "Risale-i Nur" "do not pose any harm whatsoever from a religious and social point of view" (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400).

The latest March 2010 additions to the Federal List of Extremist Materials include all 34 of the latest Jehovah's Witness publications declared "extremist" in a Rostov-on-Don court ruling, upheld by the Supreme Court in December 2009 (see F18News 5 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1417).

Krasnoyarsk criminal charges

Vladimir Ruban, the assistant head of Krasnoyarsk regional FSB's Investigation Department, signed the criminal charge against the four Nursi readers on 26 February. The four – Gerasimov and Petry, as well as Fizuli Askarov and Andrei Dedkov – are accused of violating Article 282.2 Part 1 of the Criminal Code ("organising activity by a banned religious or other association"), which carries a maximum penalty of three years' imprisonment.

The charge against Gerasimov, seen by Forum 18, claims that in 2006 he and the three others began a religious organisation and the joint reading of Nursi's works. It describes Nursi readers as "members of a criminal group".

Even after the 2008 Supreme Court ban, the document adds, the four continued "organised activity" by the banned group, including by "distributing extremist literature" and "conspiracy". The charge echoes the wording of the resolution opening the criminal case (see F18News 23 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1412).

Gerasimov told Forum 18 that the charges against the other three are similarly worded.

Ruban's telephone at the FSB went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 3 and 4 March.

Dagestan investigation "dragging on"

Meanwhile, two Nursi readers in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan, Ziyavdin Dapayev and Ruslan Bulatov, are still being investigated under Article 282.2, Part 2 of the Criminal Code ("participation in a banned religious extremist organisation"), which carries a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment. The investigation has been underway since mid-December 2009, when homes associated with Nursi readers in three Dagestani towns were subjected to armed raids (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400).

Complaining that the investigation is "dragging on", Dapayev claimed that this was because the authorities have no proof of any wrongdoing. "Our lawyer told us we could easily win any case," he told Forum 18 on 3 March. "Of course we read Nursi's works – they teach us to understand our faith. But they want to brand us as terrorists." (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background, see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287 and 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

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