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RUSSIA: Lutheran extremists?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18, and Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

After initially denying it, Officer Senichev (who refused to give his first name) of Kaluga Police in central Russia admitted to Forum 18 News Service that eleven armed officers with dogs had interrupted the 28 February Sunday morning service of St George's Lutheran congregation. "We had a call on the hotline that extremist literature was there. We're obliged by law to investigate all such calls." He was unable to specify which Russian law requires the police to respond to anonymous calls. Senichev was also unable to say why, if extremist literature was believed to be present, police officers conducting a search needed to be armed and accompanied by dogs. Nor was he able to explain why the search was conducted during the church's Sunday worship service. The preacher at the service, Pastor Igor Knyazev, later wrote an article entitled "How to behave during raids". Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that an administrative fine on two members in Krasnodar Region was accompanied by the first official order in post-Soviet Russia to destroy their confiscated literature.

Police in the town of Kaluga south-west of the Russian capital Moscow raided the Sunday morning service of St George's Lutheran congregation on 28 February, Kaluga police, prosecutor's office and the church's pastor Dmitry Martyshenko separately confirmed to Forum 18 News Service. Pastor Martyshenko told Forum 18 that eleven police officers armed with automatic weapons and accompanied by police dogs burst into the service, looking for alleged "extremist literature". "Our explanations that the Bible and books of the [Lutheran] Augsburg Confession have nothing to do with extremist literature didn't seem to convince them," he told Forum 18 from Kaluga on 12 March.

Pastor Martyshenko of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Augsburg Confession in Russia told Forum 18 that when the armed officers burst in, they blocked the church doors to prevent anyone leaving or entering. They said they had received a report that "extremist literature" was present at the church. "They told us it was an anonymous call, but that they had to follow up on it." While one officer openly filmed the search, another officer sat at the back filling in forms which she did not show to the congregation. "All the officers showed a highly negative attitude towards us," Martyshenko told Forum 18.

Pastor Martyshenko said the police checked the only literature present at the church – Bibles and hymnbooks – as they hunted for the alleged extremist literature. He added that late-comers to the ordination service were prevented from entering to join the fifteen or so church members inside. He said the search lasted about one hour.

The service was also attended by Archbishop Iosif Baron of the Augsburg Lutheran Church, who had come to the church in Kaluga to ordain Martyshenko. Church members continued the service despite the interruption.

Pastor Martyshenko believes the only reason the police did not stop the service was that a church member who is also an elected member of the Regional Legislative Assembly – Vyacheslav Gorbatin - was present in the congregation.

Later the same day, Pastor Martyshenko was summoned to the police station to give a statement. At the station he asked the police why they had raided the church and why they needed a statement. "They told me a 'sect' was meeting there with 'extremist' literature," he told Forum 18.

Officer Senichev (who refused to give his first name) of the 1st department of Kaluga Police initially denied to Forum 18 on 23 March that the Lutheran church had been raided. However, he then conceded that eleven armed officers with dogs had interrupted the 28 February service. "We had a call on the hotline that extremist literature was there. We're obliged by law to investigate all such calls." He was unable to specify which Russian law requires the police to respond to anonymous reports on the hotline.

Senichev was also unable to say why, if extremist literature was believed to be present, police officers conducting a search needed to be armed and accompanied by dogs. Nor was he able to answer Forum 18's question as to why the search was conducted during the church's Sunday worship service.

Hostility to local Lutherans

While the congregation has been able to worship undisturbed since the 28 February raid, Pastor Martyshenko complained to Forum

18 of what he described as "hostility" to the Lutheran community locally. He said he believes this has stepped up since the community acquired its own worship building in December 2009.

He pointed to several negative articles in local newspapers since the beginning of 2010, particularly a 7 March attack in the paper published by the Kaluga branch of the United Russia political party. It described the community as a "Catholic sect" which has recently stepped up its "proselytism". It described the 28 February raid as confirming accusations against the community, and particularly criticised Gorbatin.

Pastor Martyshenko also complained that despite repeated attempts by the community, the church has been unable to get the legal designation of its church building changed to match its current use.

He added that the 1st department of Kaluga Police later phoned him demanding that he show them the documents proving ownership of the church building and the land underneath it. He asked why this was a matter for the police and said he would only provide this in response to a written request. On 12 March the police sent him the written request, to which he has one month to respond.

"How to behave during raids"

Preaching the sermon at the raided service was Pastor Igor Knyazev from Moscow. Two days later, he wrote an article drawing on his experience, "How to behave during raids" <http://www.luther.ru/church/38-2008-11-02-14-08-42/932-2010-03-02-16-46-03.html>. He urged church members whose services, churches or church offices were being raided by police, the FSB security service, or riot police, to remain calm, conduct themselves with dignity, not to provoke the raiders and try to negotiate with them.

Other suggestions Pastor Knyazev made included that church members should: ensure that raiders present any demands in writing; take witnesses if summoned to a police station; and tell as many people as possible if the authorities attempt to intimidate people or recruit spies within the community.

Prosecutor investigating raid

On 3 March, Pastor Martyshenko complained to various officials, including Yuri Zelnikov, Kaluga Regional Ombudsperson for Human Rights, asking him to investigate whether the 28 February police raid was legal. In a letter seen by Forum 18, Zelnikov passed on the enquiry two days later to Mikhail Yevstigneyev, Kaluga's Acting Prosecutor.

Yevstigneyev confirmed that police had interrupted the Lutheran service on 28 February. "We're investigating the legality of the incident in response to the complaint," he told Forum 18 from Kaluga on 23 March. He said he has 30 days to complete his enquiries. "I beg you not to jump to conclusions before the investigation is complete." He said that the police might well have had reasons for the raid. "We're checking to see whether there was a call to them or not." He stressed that if the police violated the law, they could face disciplinary measures or even – "depending on the seriousness" – criminal charges.

Yevstigneyev insisted to Forum 18 that he does not believe the police are hostile to "other faiths". Asked to explain what he means by "other faiths", he specified the Lutherans. Asked whether the police would have raided, for example, a Sunday service in a Russian Orthodox church, he responded: "I don't think so."

Yevstigneyev stressed that no criminal case nor investigation is underway against any local Lutherans over alleged "extremist" literature.

On 19 March, in a written response seen by Forum 18, the 1st department of Kaluga Police told Pastor Martyshenko that its investigation into the raid had uncovered "no violations of the law on the part of police officers".

Crackdown on those the government brands "extremist"

Amid a continuing, widespread campaign against those the government brands religious "extremists", Jehovah's Witnesses and readers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi have been particular victims. Many of their works have been branded "extremist" and placed on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Distribution, preparation or storage with the aim of distribution of these titles may result in prosecution under Criminal Code Article 282 ("incitement of ethnic, racial or religious hatred"), whose penalties range from a fine to up to five years in prison. However, the authorities may instead choose to prosecute under Article 20.29 of the Administrative Violations Code ("production and distribution of extremist material"), whose penalties range from a fine to up to 15 days' detention.

For the first time in post-Soviet Russia to Forum 18's knowledge, formal criminal charges were in February brought against readers of religious literature. Four readers of the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi have been charged with breaking 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. Nursi readers are described in the charges as "members of a criminal group" (see F18News 4 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1416).

Mid-March saw raids on four Jehovah's Witness homes and place of worship in Tambov, where a criminal case has been launched. In Taganrog, officials have continued to question local Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 22 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1424). Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 of many more brief detentions of their adherents across Russia (see F18News 25 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1426).

"Confiscate and destroy"

In what Jehovah's Witnesses say is the first official order in post-Soviet Russia to confiscate and destroy their literature, Magistrate Sergei Bondarev of Tuapse District (Krasnodar Region) has fined Sevak Mesropyan and Artem Zograbyan a total of 3,000 Roubles (604 Norwegian Kroner, 76 Euros or 102 US Dollars) for "production and distribution of extremist material" (Article 20.29 of the Administrative Violations Code).

Despite repeated calls on 22 and 23 March, Forum 18 was unable to reach Bondarev at Tuapse District Court.

Viewed by Forum 18, Bondarev's 12 March rulings note that when the pair were stopped by police while driving through the settlement of Messazhai on the morning of 11 March, "material of an extremist nature" was discovered in the boot of Mesropyan's car. Mesropyan argued that he did not know the 71 items of literature he was carrying – copies of the book "Come Be My Follower", according to Jehovah's Witness press secretary Grigory Martynov – had been declared extremist, while Zograbyan denied personal connection with the literature. The magistrate rejected their arguments, however, and ordered the literature be "confiscated and destroyed". The pair intend to appeal.

The magistrate's ruling against Mesropyan cites Article 29.10 of the Administrative Violations Code, Part 3 of which provides for the destruction of confiscated material following a successful conviction. So far in such cases, Jehovah's Witness literature is typically confiscated without record or protocol of seizure, and it is not known what happens to it (see F18News 5 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1417).

Muslim extremism conviction

Accused of membership of the banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir, Dina Amirova was handed down a 2.5-year suspended sentence for organising the activity of an extremist organisation (Article 282.2, Part 1 of the Criminal Code) by a court in Kazan (Tatarstan Republic) on 5 March. Amirova insisted to Forum 18 in Kazan in 2009 that, although she had possessed Hizb ut-Tahrir literature, it had no special significance in her personal library and that she was never in contact with anyone from the organisation (see F18News 8 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1323). (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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