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RUSSIA: Dagestan's controls on Islamic literature

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Russia's North Caucasus republic of Dagestan does not formally ban particular items of Islamic literature, but it grants the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan exclusive vetting powers over what is circulated, Forum 18 News Service has found. The restrictions are not always enforced. In practice, Islamic literature which does not display an endorsement from the Directorate is regarded with suspicion. There are limited opportunities to buy or sell such literature, as all mosques and prominent Islamic bookshops come under Directorate control. For Dagestan's many practising Muslims, easy access to information on Islam is thus limited to a relatively narrow range of viewpoints. Possession of "unapproved" books may mean the authorities identify their owner as a "Wahhabi extremist". Directorate bookshops carry many pamphlets condemning so-called Wahhabism in a way similar to Orthodox anti-sectarian brochures, with titles such as "Caution, Wahhabism!" and "Confessions of An English Spy". Only Arabic texts of the Koran are on sale. This starkly contrasts with the stock of a small independent Islamic bookshop visited by Forum 18.

While Dagestan's government does not formally ban particular items of Islamic literature, it grants the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan exclusive vetting powers over what is circulated, Forum 18 News Service has found. "It's clearer to them if someone calls for violence or not," Rasul Gadzhiyev, departmental head of Dagestan's Ministry for Nationality Policy, Information and External Affairs, explained in the capital Makhachkala on 22 April.

Dagestan's 1998 Religion Law requires that all Islamic literature be endorsed by the Directorate (Article 21). A separate law adopted in 1999 specifically targets Wahhabism – defined only as an "extremist trend". In Dagestan Forum 18 found that Salafis - advocates of what they regard as a pure form of Islam as practised by the earliest Muslims - are informally referred to as Wahhabis regardless of whether they reject violence (see F18News 5 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1440).

Restrictions on Islamic literature represent a major element in the near monopoly on Muslim public life enjoyed by the Directorate (see F18News 25 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1449), as do restrictions on Islamic religious education (see F18News 2 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1453).

The restrictions are not always enforced. In practice, they mean that Islamic literature which does not display an endorsement from the Directorate is regarded with suspicion. There are limited opportunities to buy or sell such literature, as all mosques and prominent Islamic bookshops come under Directorate control. For Dagestan's many practising Muslims, easy access to information on Islam is thus limited to a relatively narrow range of viewpoints. Moreover, possession of "unapproved" books may mean the authorities identify their owner as a "Wahhabi extremist".

Dagestan - a republic in Russia's troubled North Caucasus which borders Azerbaijan and Georgia - is highly ethnically diverse. Most of the population is of Muslim background, the majority of them Sunnis but with a Shia minority.

Approved and unapproved

Some Islamic literature opposed by Directorate clerics – such as Russian translations of the Koran – could not be formally banned as extremist anyway, Abdulmumin Gadzhiyev (no relation to Rasul), Islamic affairs correspondent with Dagestan's popular independent Russian-language newspaper Chernovik, told Forum 18 on 15 April. "But it doesn't stop them [the Directorate] saying you're not allowed to read it or going round town telling Muslim bookshops to remove this or that literature," he remarked.

Dated 1 June 2006, a list of Islamic books containing "canonical mistakes" and therefore "not approved by the Expert Council of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan" was posted on a Russian-language internet forum in September 2008. It contains 173 titles, including many legally published in Moscow and Kazan (Tatarstan Republic), such as the renowned Russian translation of the Koran by Elmir Kuliyev and works by Shamil Alyautdinov, imam of the memorial mosque in Moscow's Victory Park.

Soon after such lists were circulated in Makhachkala in February 2009, a mob raided an independent Islamic bookshop in the city centre, its proprietor Magomedkhan Gaziyeu told Forum 18 on 20 April. The mob leader accused Gaziyeu of being a Wahhabi and selling Wahhabi literature, he recalled, even though the shop operates legally and its books are freely published elsewhere in Russia. The mob leader then ordered his approximately 100 accomplices to remove the shop's entire stock, worth some 100,000 Roubles

(20,852 Norwegian Kroner, 2,567 Euros or 3,209 US Dollars). A state investigation into the incident has failed to locate either the stock or perpetrators, who had tried to attack other Islamic bookshops in the neighbourhood before finding Gaziye's open.

Directorate press secretary Magomedrasul Omarov confirmed to Forum 18 on 21 April that about a week before the raid its representatives had toured Makhachkala's mosques and approximately 30 Islamic shops showing two lists of literature recommended and not recommended by the Directorate. He insisted the close proximity of the raid and visits was pure coincidence.

Forum 18 found a stark contrast between Gaziye's small bookshop and those operated by the Directorate. Gaziye's carries titles mainly published outside Dagestan, including seven works by Alyautdinov and several Russian-language translations of the Koran. The majority of books in the Directorate's opulent shops near to Makhachkala's main mosque are published in Dagestan and deal with aspects of Sufism or the life and teachings of Sheikh Said-afandi of Chirkei, a particular spiritual authority for the Directorate. They also carry numerous pamphlets condemning Wahhabism in a manner similar to Orthodox anti-sectarian brochures, with titles such as "Caution, Wahhabism!" and "Confessions of An English Spy". Only Arabic texts of the Koran are on sale.

What's wrong with Russian Koran?

While praising some translations of the Koran on sale in Dagestan, Maksud Sadikov, rector of Makhachkala's Institute of Theology and International Relations - which works closely with the Directorate - acknowledged that they were not generally welcomed by the wider religious community. "A literal translation could lead a person into error, as the Koran is the word of God, and every word needs a commentary on what it means," he explained to Forum 18 on 20 April.

Shamil Shikhaliyev, head of the Oriental Manuscripts Department at the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, recounted an incident suggesting the local authorities follow the Directorate's position on Islamic literature. In 2004, he told Forum 18, he was briefly detained by a local police officer concerned that he was carrying a book in Arabic, but was released as soon as the officer was satisfied that its author had been a teacher to Sheikh Said-afandi.

Shikhaliyev suspects that the local restrictions on literature are commercially based: "What connection do translations of the Koran and hadiths (sayings attributed to the Muslim Prophet Mohammed) have with Wahhabism?" he pointed out to Forum 18 on 16 April. "The Directorate criticises translations of the Koran, saying the translator adds a subjective sense – but in sermons they read excerpts in Arabic and then recite a translation."

A Makhachkala-based lawyer working with the Russian human rights organisation Memorial, Ziyautdin Uvaisov similarly suggested to Forum 18 on 15 April that the purpose of the restrictions was to secure a monopoly on Koranic interpretation.

Salafi brothers Abumuslim and Mogamed Shafiyev maintained to Forum 18 in the southern city of Derbent on 17 April that the restrictions' deeper purpose was to stop people thinking for themselves. "They don't want an educated society – when society is educated it cannot be controlled. If someone reads, is educated, he'll say, 'You what? That's not on!'" (see F18News 4 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1439).

Nursi doubts

Makhachkala resident Ziyavdin Dapayev remains a suspect in a criminal extremism investigation opened in December 2009, but is no longer a defendant and there have been no further developments in the case, he told Forum 18 on 19 April. His 20-strong home reading group devoted to the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi has now been raided four times - in 2007, 2008 and in April and December of 2009, he said. Dapayev estimates that a total of 10,000 books were seized in the course of these raids; officially under expert analysis, they are not subject to return, he explained.

Dapayev described to Forum 18 how the raids took the form of full-blown counterterrorist operations, with up to 80 armed law enforcement agents. On the last occasion the entire building was cordoned off, he said, "as if we're criminals, although everyone knows we don't pose any danger whatsoever".

After the raids, a RIA Novosti Dagestan report on 24 December 2009 claimed that "conspiratorial cells" of Nursi readers meet in "conspiratorial flats" in Dagestan (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400).

Russian translations of Nursi's "Risale-i Nur" ("Messages of Light") multi-part Koranic commentary were outlawed by Moscow's Koptevo District Court in May 2007 and subsequently added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Nurdzhular – which Nursi readers insist does not exist – was then banned as an extremist organisation by Russia's Supreme Court in April 2008. Defenders of state action against Nursi followers routinely claim that his works are banned in Turkey, but official Turkish government documents viewed by Forum 18 state categorically that the theologian's works are not harmful in any way whatsoever and are freely available in Turkey (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400).

Commissioned by a district court in Krasnoyarsk in June 2009 to analyse "Tenth Word on the Resurrection of the Dead", a part of

"Risale-i Nur" not outlawed by Koptevo Court, three experts from Moscow State University – including two psychology professors – have concluded that it contains no signs of extremism. Their 28 April 2010 report states that "a belief in the superiority of one's world view over other world views is characteristic of the doctrines of Islam, other religions and atheism, as it accounts for the choice of that particular world view"

In Dagestan, Nursi's works were widely known and accepted before the bans. "They were sold in official Directorate shops with their approval and imams had them," Dapayev told Forum 18. Soon after the ban on the Russian translations of "Risale-i Nur" these were withdrawn, but this has not stopped the FSB security service from confiscating non-banned Nursi titles and copies of the Koran, he said.

There is doubt in Dagestan about the federal-level ban on Nursi literature, as there also is in Tatarstan (see F18News 16 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1328). Dapayev and his fellow Nursi readers continue to attend Makhachkala's main, Directorate-controlled mosque, where worshippers regard them positively, he told Forum 18. Sadikov, the Institute rector, gave the group premises for meetings in March 2010 but stopped after the FSB security service warned him he would have problems if the arrangement continued, Dapayev said.

Sadikov told Forum 18 that "we don't find any canonical flaws in the works of Said Nursi" and described him as "a great scholar". He acknowledged that he had invited Nursi readers to use his institute's premises, but said they had stopped coming after several meetings. He claimed not to know why. (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>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY