

26 July 2010

RUSSIA: Outdoor activity harassed, banned and violently attacked

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

Outdoor public religious activity by Russian Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees and Protestants has resulted in harassment by the police, repeated bans, and in one case a refusal to defend a Protestant meeting against violent attack involving stun grenades, Forum 18 News Service notes. The categories of activity targeted subdivide into very small groups of people sharing their beliefs with others in conversation in the street - normally Jehovah's Witnesses or occasionally Protestants - and outdoor public meetings or worship. By far the most common form of harassment takes place against pairs of Jehovah's Witnesses, and can involve unduly severe treatment of elderly or infirm people. Hare Krishna devotees in both Smolensk and Stavropol regions have experienced repeated banning of outdoor meetings, on grounds such as that they "inconvenience tourists on the way to the drinking fountains". Baptists in Rostov Region have experienced an attempted ban on a street library. Baptists in Tambov Region were banned from holding evangelistic concerts in a village, and when they were attacked with stun grenades by unknown people police did nothing to defend them.

Visible public religious activity in Russia is increasingly resulting in harassment by police, Forum 18 News Service notes, in some cases from officers responsible for fighting extremism. Recent cases involve Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees and Baptists, who risk detentions, fines, bans and literature confiscations.

The categories of public religious activity targeted subdivide into very small groups of people sharing their beliefs with others in conversation in the street – normally Jehovah's Witnesses or occasionally Protestants - and outdoor public meetings or worship. By far the most common form of harassment takes place against groups of two people.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of Said Nursi's works also continue to be stopped and searched for literature banned under anti-extremism legislation, but a new development is the use of the Traffic Police - which is not part of the ordinary police, but is also under the Federal Interior Ministry - for such searches. In another new development, police officers seized a Nursi title which is not one of the banned titles on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. They justified this by claiming that the text is identical to a banned title. Police refused to tell Forum 18 how they knew that three minibuses they stopped and searched contained Jehovah's Witnesses, or how they knew that a person detained on arrival at Novosibirsk railway station would be carrying translations of works by Said Nursi. In another development, imports of every print edition of two Jehovah's Witness magazines - "The Watchtower" and "Awake!" - and not just editions on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, have been banned (see F18News 27 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1470).

Those offering religious literature on the street or door-to-door were targets in many of the over 265 incidents of state harassment reported by the Jehovah's Witnesses since the landmark Supreme Court ruling against them on 8 December 2009. The ruling upheld an earlier decision by Rostov-on-Don Regional Court outlawing 34 Jehovah's Witness titles as extremist and dissolving the local Jehovah's Witness religious organisation in Taganrog (see F18News 8 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1385).

On 13 July 2010 the Jehovah's Witnesses submitted an appeal to the Supreme Court against the 27 January 2010 endorsement by Altai Republic Supreme Court of a lower court verdict outlawing a further 18 of their titles as extremist (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400).

Muslim readers of the works of theologian Said Nursi, whose works in Russian translation are also banned as extremist, are also targeted across Russia (see eg. F18News 7 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1464).

Street sharing of beliefs targeted

Most of the latest harassment of very small groups sharing their beliefs resemble those previously reported (see most recently F18News 25 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1426). In some cases police appear to have acted with undue severity against arrested people who are either elderly or in a poor state of health.

On 29 June, three police officers who did not identify themselves detained two women in their seventies who were offering

Jehovah's Witness literature on the streets of Sarapul (Udmurtia). At the police station they were forced to empty their pockets and bags under threat of being strip-searched. They were also forced to hand over their Bibles and Jehovah's Witness magazines. Police continued to question the two elderly women, even though one of them said she had a headache and was suffering pain from her heart. Medical attention was refused. Cases under the Code of Administrative Violations were launched against the two. They were finally freed at 11 pm, more than three hours after their detention.

On 7 April, police detained and seized religious literature from two Jehovah's Witnesses in their eighties, Yevdokiya Popova and Lyudmila Derbentseva, who had been preaching in the village of Oblivskaya (Rostov-on-Don Region).

On 26 February, two Jehovah's Witnesses in their seventies, Militina Churbanova and Zinaida Zolotareva, were detained for six hours by police in Cherepovets (Vologda Region) after they circulated copies of "Is History Repeating Itself?". This leaflet defends Jehovah's Witnesses against state claims of religious extremism, and was distributed by the entire Russian Jehovah's Witness membership in late February (see F18News 26 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1415).

In Smolensk Region, an attempt to prosecute two Hare Krishna devotees for activity similar to these Jehovah's Witness cases failed. The region has banned a Hare Krishna public meeting (see below), but a magistrate's court found no case against Belarusian citizens Mikhail Senkevich and Andrei Urin for distributing Hare Krishna literature on the street on 6 April. The pair had been accused of violating the region's 2003 Law on Missionary Activity and corresponding Article 28 of the regional Administrative Violations Code ("violating regulations on missionary activity"). The local Krishna community nevertheless received an official warning as a result from Smolensk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office on 17 May.

Street library targeted

Unlike Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants are not being targeted nationwide in connection with alleged religious extremism nor subject to large-scale harassment of their street activities. However, they occasionally experience harassment by police and local officials of public activity in streets.

On 31 March, the Wednesday before Easter, four Council of Churches Baptists in Salsk (Rostov-on-Don Region) offered Christian books and leaflets free of charge to passers-by. However, police ordered them to go to the police station "for a check-up on the literature," the Baptists told Forum 18. The four were then taken to the Prosecutor's Office before being taken back to the police station. The Baptists' books were confiscated without any record being drawn up and they were then released.

A case under Article 13.22 of the federal Administrative Violations Code ("violation of the procedure for giving publication data") was brought against one of the four, Vitaly Bibik, but on 25 May a lay magistrate ruled that no offence had been committed, cancelled the case and returned the confiscated books, the Baptists told Forum 18.

Local official behind harassment?

The Baptists have been operating the street library in Salsk for 13 years. They say trouble began in 2009, when Oleg Krakhmalny, the official in charge of relations with political, social, religious and ethnic organisations at Salsk District administration, "banned" the street library several times and called the police.

In the village of Pechineno (Samara Region), members of several Council of Churches Baptist congregations were offering Christian books door-to-door on 10 June and inviting villagers to an evangelistic event when a senior local official and police officer told them they were breaking the law.

The following day the road police stopped at their street library to check church members' identity documents and ask why and in what vehicles they had arrived. Four of the Baptists were then taken to the police station. Two – Sergei Yurkin and Aleksandr Imashov – were taken to court accused of violating Article 20.2, Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code ("violation of the procedure for organising meetings, demonstrations, processions and pickets"). Despite their protestations that they were not violating social order nor causing harm, and that only restrictions necessary and established by law are allowable in a democratic society, a lay magistrate fined each of them 1,000 Roubles (206 Norwegian Kroner, 26 Euros or 33 US Dollars).

Public meeting banned and attacked with stun grenades

When local members of the Baptist Union in Tambov Region sought to hold a series of evangelistic events in Sosnovka village from the evening of Saturday 10 July, its administration rejected their 30 June request, Pastor Vadim Mikhailin of Truth Baptist Church in Tambov told Forum 18 on 22 July. Officials cited opposition from Russian Orthodox clergy reported in the local newspaper. Their meetings on 9 July with Valery Toporkov, the village's head of administration, and the local Prosecutor's Office failed to overcome objections, and police recommended that they not conduct any events without permission.

Permission not being a legal requirement, the Baptists went ahead with a rehearsal in the evening of 9 July attended by some local residents, but police arrived after two separate complaints - one from an elected representative. A deputy police chief admitted that

the Baptists were not breaking the law. However, an aggressive group of people arrived late that night, swore and threw stun grenades at them while police watched. "The police failed to intervene to stop the attack and in the early hours of Saturday morning we were forced to flee," Pastor Mikhalin complained to Forum 18.

Village head of administration Toporkov told Forum 18 on 26 July that he had not been present when the group of people had attacked the Baptists. But he conceded that the police have a duty to protect people against attack.

Colonel Sergei Vatanovsky, head of Sosnovka District Police, declined absolutely to discuss with Forum 18 on 26 July the Baptists' allegations that his officers failed to defend them from attack.

In a similar case which reached the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg involving another Protestant church, the right to hold public meetings and the duty of the authorities to defend meetings against aggressive attack was clearly established in 2007 (see F18News 1 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1001).

They "interpret the law in their own way"

Village head of administration Toporkov insisted to Forum 18 that the Baptists had failed to meet the requirements of Tambov Region's law, though he could not remember the name of the law. The Baptists "interpret the law in their own way," he complained. He said they had failed to describe the proposed events in detail, to provide a contact name who would be responsible, and the application had not been presented in time and had no signature. He told Forum 18 that the local Russian Orthodox priest had not been in contact with the village administration about the proposed events.

The 30 June application, seen by Forum 18, does include a contact name and telephone number and does contain a signature. Attached to it was a detailed list of proposed events. Under the federal 2004 Demonstrations Law, which should take precedence over regional law, notifications of public events are to be submitted between 15 and ten days beforehand, so the Baptists' application was on time.

More public meetings banned

Hare Krishna devotees in both Smolensk and Stavropol regions have also suffered repeated banning of their outdoor meetings.

After a Smolensk Region local authority's attempt at a prosecution failed, Hare Krishna devotees were instead targeted by the region's counterextremism police. Their 22 May protocol, seen by Forum 18, accuses Krishna devotees of worshipping without permission in a local park: "Approximately three metres from the bronze reindeer statue is a group of persons in orange clothing; the nose of each of them bears an orange-yellow mark. There are around ten people on the territory, reciting the phrase 'Hare-Krishna, Hare-Rama'."

In an undated submission of related material to the head of the regional counterextremism police, also seen by Forum 18, police colonel Konstantin Moiseyev refers to detentions in the park of "persons conducting an event (..) dedicated to the worship of Hare-Krishna (..) with singing and musical accompaniment to the beat of a tambourine."

On 29 June Sergei Gapeyev of the Smolensk Krishna community successfully appealed against a fine of 3,000 Roubles (318 Norwegian Kroner, 78 Euros or 99 US Dollars) handed down on 9 June due to the incident by a commission attached to Smolensk's Lenin District administration. The commission had maintained that worship in the park fell under Article 31.2 of the regional Administrative Violations Code ("violating procedures for holding mass cultural events"), but Lenin District Court found that it had failed to specify precisely which procedures were violated.

"Inconvenience tourists on the way to the drinking fountains"

In Stavropol Region, the Hare Krishna community of Kislovodsk has received more than ten refusals in just over two months to approve street processions from the municipal administrations of Kislovodsk, Pyatigorsk, Yessentuki and Zheleznovodsk. Issued between mid-April and mid-July and viewed by Forum 18, reasons given include the threat of terrorism, that the pedestrian area of Pyatigorsk's Kirov Prospekt is "intended for strolls by town residents and tourists" which could be hindered by a procession of 20 people, and that a procession in a park would "inconvenience tourists on the way to the drinking fountains and their relaxation after taking the mineral waters".

Vladimir Pryadkin, First Deputy Head of Yessentuki Administration, insisted that the many bans he had issued to the Hare Krishna community, the latest on 19 July for up to five devotees to sing in a park without an amplifier, were all in accordance with the law. "They applied to hold processions in places where public demonstrations are banned in law," he told Forum 18 on 26 July. He said one such procession had taken place earlier and that the town administration had offered another venue.

The Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 the alternative site was a park a long way from the town centre and that with the most recent application they had been told to hold the event indoors.

"People listening to them sing suffer"

Vladimir Veretennikov, chief of staff of Pyatigorsk Administration, who signed one refusal, pointed out to Forum 18 on 26 July that the Hare Krishna community regularly conducts processions in the town, most recently on 4 July with another planned for 31 July, which the Hare Krishna community confirmed to Forum 18.

He added that "special attention" is needed for each procession though, including the presence of a police officer "to prevent attacks on them by hooligans". He said processions should not disturb local people – "people listening to them sing suffer", he claimed. He said while a group of friends do not require permission to walk and sing together on the street, "this is a religious rite" and thus needs special permission. (END)

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).

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, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

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>.

© Forum 18 News Service. All rights reserved. ISSN 1504-2855.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY