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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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RUSSIA: Traffic Police start searches for religious literature

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Russia continues to stop and search Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of Said Nursi's works for literature banned under anti-extremism legislation. However, Forum 18 News Service notes that 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 - to conduct 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. A legal case following the seizure is pending. 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 in Russia. An official denied to Forum 18 that this is censorship.

Security agencies continue to stop and search Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of Said Nursi's works for literature banned under Russia's anti-extremism legislation. However, 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 - to conduct such searches, Forum 18 News Service has found. Officials involved in the detention and confiscation of religious literature from a Nursi reader and a large group of Jehovah's Witnesses have refused to explain to Forum 18 how they were identified for searches.

In another new development, police officers seized an edition of one of Nursi's works which is not one of the titles banned by a court and subsequently placed on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. They justified this by claiming that the text is identical to a banned title. A legal case following the seizure is pending.

Much of the latest harassment involving police searching for religious texts resembles previous incidents (see eg. F18News 25 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1426).

Outdoor highly visible public religious activity – such as meetings for worship or to publicise beliefs - by Russian Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees and Protestants has also 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. 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 severe treatment of elderly or infirm people (see F18News 26 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1469).

Traffic Police search for religious literature

On 9 July Traffic Police at the Uspensky traffic control post, on the border of Krasnodar and Stavropol Regions, detained 45 Jehovah's Witnesses travelling in three minibuses to a religious congress in Nevinnomyssk in Stavropol Region. Officers demanded to see their passports, copies of "The Watchtower" and other religious literature. Asked why they had been stopped, one officer explained: "I have an order, I have to report back on whether I find even one title from the List [of Extremist Materials]."

In December 2009, Russia's Supreme Court upheld an earlier decision outlawing 34 Jehovah's Witness titles as extremist and placing them on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, as well as dissolving the local Jehovah's Witness religious organisation in Taganrog (see F18News 8 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1385).

Officials at Krasnodar Region Traffic Police declined to discuss the incident, referring Forum 18 on 26 July to the Uspensky traffic control post where the Jehovah's Witnesses were stopped.

An officer at the Uspensky post, who refused to give his name, defended the stopping of the minibuses and confiscation of the Jehovah's Witnesses' literature. "The courts have banned their literature," he told Forum 18 on 27 July. Asked whether officers had known when they stopped the minibuses that the occupants were Jehovah's Witnesses, the officer refused to say. But he added: "I

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can't remember what traffic violation they were committing – it was so long ago. But when we checked the vehicles we found the banned literature."

The Uspensky post officer confirmed that his post has access to licence details for all vehicles registered in the Russian Federation, but repeatedly declined to say whether officers had been given information in advance to look for the three specific minibuses.

On 12 March, Traffic Police stopped a Jehovah's Witness at a roadside checkpoint on the grounds of "conducting a check-up on the transportation of extremist literature". Although none of the literature in his car was on the Federal List, the Traffic Police took him to Moscow Region's Voskresensk District ordinary police station.

In Dzerzhinsk (Nizhny Novgorod Region), Traffic Police detained two Jehovah's Witnesses in the entrance hall to a block of flats on 26 March. At a local police station, they were searched and had their literature confiscated. A similar incident happened to two Jehovah's Witnesses sitting in a parked car in Shuchye (Kurgan Region) on 3 March.

How did police know of Nursi reader's arrival?

Muslim readers of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi do not share their faith on the street, but on 22 June one was stopped at the train station in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk suspected of intending to distribute extremist literature. Police Colonel Aleksandr Trubitsyn detained Komil Odilov as he got off a Krasnoyarsk-Novosibirsk train and escorted him to the local police Counterextremism Department, according to the 24 June official record of an administrative case opened against Odilov and viewed by Forum 18.

Odilov was then found to be carrying three copies of Nursi's "Way of the Sunna", which is not among the 14 titles from Nursi's "Risale-i Nur" ("Messages of Light") Koranic commentary Russian translation outlawed by Moscow's Koptevo District Court in May 2007 (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

However, the counterextremism officers compared "Way of the Sunna" with "Way of Truth", a banned title on a website freely accessible in Russia, www.nurru.com, and found the titles to be identical. A case against Odilov is pending under Article 20.29 of the Administrative Violations Code ("production and distribution of extremist materials"), whose maximum punishment for individuals is a fine of 3,000 Roubles (318 Norwegian Kroner, 78 Euros or 99 US Dollars) or 15 days' detention.

Nursi readers told Forum 18 that Odilov was questioned for four hours before being released.

A. Tokarev, an officer in the police Counterextremism Department for Novosibirsk Region, who has been involved in the case, told Forum 18 on 26 July that the case has not been handed over to court. This, he said, is because experts appointed by the Interior Ministry are still studying the confiscated books.

Current official practice is that a title must match a title on the Federal List of Extremist Materials exactly in order for prosecution to follow, although some of the 686 listed to date lack precision. The 1996 and 2003 editions of the Jehovah's Witness brochure "What Does God Require of Us?" – banned by the Altai and Rostov-on-Don courts respectively – are listed as separate entries, for example. Also, criminal investigators in Moscow dropped extremism charges against Aslambek Ezhayev in February 2009 for publishing Arab theologian Muhammad ali Al-Hashimi's "The Personality of a Muslim" after expert analysis established that his edition was not identical to that specified on the Federal List (see F18News 24 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1209).

Tokarev of the police Counterextremism Department insisted that the content of the book is more important in determining if it is extremist than the exact edition. "If it is the same text but in another edition than the one on the List, it still contains extremist ideas," he told Forum 18.

Asked how the police knew that an individual carrying copies of Nursi's works was arriving at Novosibirsk station, Tokarev responded: "I won't tell you that." He then put the phone down.

Readers of Nursi's works are targeted across Russia (see eg. F18News 7 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1464).

Total ban imposed on two Jehovah's Witness magazines

Russia's supervisory body for information technology and mass communications, Roskomnadzor, announced on 30 April that it had annulled permission to distribute "The Watchtower" and "Awake!" publications - and not just the individual issues entered on the Federal List of Extremist Materials in the wake of the December 2009 Supreme Court verdict.

Mikhail Vorobyov of Roskomnadzor denied to Forum 18 that his agency's decision represented censorship. He explained that the decision to revoke permission had been taken on the basis of court decisions finding some articles in these publications to be

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"extremist". "We didn't initiate these and we didn't conduct the expert analyses," he insisted to Forum 18 on 8 June. "The Jehovah's Witnesses can't import these works without our permission."

Asked why Jehovah's Witnesses – or any other religious organisation - need state permission to print or import publications, Vorobyov pointed to provisions of the Media Law, which require permission to print in an edition of more than 1,000 copies or import a publication.

When Forum 18 pointed out that Jehovah's Witness magazines in Russian are still available in Russia on a Jehovah's Witness website, Vorobyov responded: "We only deal with printed materials – other organs deal with websites."

At a 2 June Moscow press conference, Aleksei Nazarychev of the Jehovah's Witnesses confirmed that they are no longer able to import or distribute the titles. He maintained that although permission to import could only be withdrawn by a court order, none had been issued. (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.

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