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RUSSIA: More raids and trials, pressure on lawyers, defendant forced to resign from job?

By Rosemary Griffin, Forum 18

Raids by Russian authorities on Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of the works of Said Nursi for alleged "extremism" continued in March, but none are yet known in April, Forum 18 News Service notes. Lawyers defending those charged have also reportedly coming under pressure from the authorities. One Jehovah's Witness facing trial in the southern region of Astrakhan, Gulfira Zakaryaeva, has stated that her employer was visited by law enforcement agents, who recommended that she be told to resign. She claims that she was told to do this of her own free will "to avoid any problems". Astrakhan Police told Forum 18 that "it is unlikely any pressure was applied" to her to resign, and her former employer declined to comment. Both groups of religious believers have been put under state surveillance, and Protestants in the far eastern Russian Republic of Sakha have received an intrusive questionnaire from the local police Centre for Combating Extremism. Police have refused to tell Forum 18 how this information will be used, or whether criminal cases will be opened against those questioned.

Raids by Russian authorities on Jehovah's Witnesses and readers of the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi for alleged "extremism" are continuing, Forum 18 News Service notes. Lawyers defending those charged with offences are also reportedly coming under pressure from the authorities, and Protestants in the far eastern Russian Republic of Sakha have received an intrusive questionnaire from the local police Centre for Combating Extremism. And Nursi readers face fresh disinformation, with strongly disputed claims that they are linked to the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Lawyer pressured

The defence lawyer for Jehovah's Witness Yelena Grigoryeva in the southern region of Astrakhan, Gulfira Zakaryaeva, has been pressured by authorities to quit the case, Jehovah's Witnesses have claimed. However, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Grigory Martynov told Forum 18 on 5 April that Zakaryaeva is still working as Grigoryeva's defence lawyer.

"Some of my relatives work in the legal profession" Zakaryaeva is quoted by the Jehovah's Witness as saying. "FSB security service agents got to them, through people I would rather not name for my own wellbeing. They told them that I should leave my role in the defence or quit the legal profession overall, to avoid certain problems." Zakaryaeva further described such attempts to put pressure on a defence lawyer as "illegal".

Both the local FSB in Astrakhan and their Press Office in the capital Moscow refused to confirm or comment to Forum 18 on her statement.

Grigoryeva is facing charges under Criminal Code Article 282 ("Incitement of hatred [nenavist] or enmity [vrazhda], as well as the humiliation of human dignity") for sharing her beliefs (See the commentary on Criminal Code Article 282 and the Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468). She is also accused – as are other Jehovah's Witnesses - of distributing printed material on the Federal List of Extremist Materials (see 11 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1539).

In 2007 the Federal List of Extremist Materials was created to centralise records of works that are banned. Those caught distributing works on the list face heavy penalties (see F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

According to Martynov, this is the second instance of the authorities putting pressure on Jehovah's Witness defence lawyers. He told Forum 18 on 6 April of a case in Asbest, in the Sverdlovsk region, "about a year ago. One of our lawyers was present when members of the local community were raided. The lawyer tried to help them, he explained their rights to them and what the police officers were legally allowed to do."

The lawyer was, Martynov said, accused of preventing officers from entering the building, filming what happened and encouraging the congregation to do the same. Martynov said that authorities later attempted to ban the lawyer from practicing for "incorrect behaviour". The case was dropped, however, and the lawyer was allowed to continue working.

Ilham Merazhov, Chair of the Committee on Education and Science of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Asian Part of Russia (part of the Council of Muftis chaired by Mufti Ravil Gainutdin), told Forum 18 on 12 April that lawyers defending Nursi readers in criminal cases are facing pressure from the authorities.

But this is not the case for all lawyers defending Nursi readers on trial in Russia. Akhmed Kolobayev, a lawyer representing Nursi readers on trial in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, told Forum 18 on 12 April that he has not experienced any pressure from local authorities while working on the case. "It is possible some of my colleagues have, but it is not something that I am aware of," Kolobayev said.

Accused forced to leave job?

Since the investigation into Jehovah's Witness Grigoryeva's case began, she has left her job as a social worker. Her house was raided on 8 February and she left her job on 11 February. Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Martynov told Forum 18 on 13 April that representatives of law enforcement agencies had visited the employer and recommended that they tell her to resign. She claims that she was told to do this of her own free will "to avoid any problems".

An Astrakhan police spokesperson told Forum 18 on 13 April that "it is unlikely any pressure was applied" to Grigoryeva to resign. The spokesperson, who would not give their name, refused to comment further on the case. The local police department in Akhtubinsk also refused to comment on the case when contacted by Forum 18 on 13 April.

Staff working for Grigoryeva's former employer, the Department of Social Protection in Akhtubinsk declined to comment to Forum 18 on 13 April.

Raids continue in March

Raids on both Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of Said Nursi's works continued in March. The Jehovah's Witnesses stated that, on 29 March, three raids were carried out on Jehovah's Witnesses in Zabaykalsky Krai, in eastern Siberia. They were carried out by three officials including one from the local FSB security service, Lieutenant Dmitry Dogadin.

The first search took place at 7.00 am at Andrei Antonov's house, where only his wife and three year old disabled child were present. Without showing a warrant, the officials entered the house and started questioning his wife about her personal and religious life. Her husband was later questioned at his workplace.

Later that morning, at 11am the same group raided the house of Vasily and Lidia Bzovi, aged 78 and 74 respectively, and both invalids. Again no search warrant was shown and religious literature was confiscated. The couple were exiled in the Soviet era for their religious beliefs, and rehabilitated in 1993 as victims of political repression.

At 3pm the same day, the group raided the summer house of Valery Sarachuk. Sarachuk was taken to his flat, where without being shown a warrant his property was searched and he was questioned for two hours.

An official at the Zabaykalsky Krai bureau in Chita told Forum 18 on 5 April that they were aware of the raids, but refused to confirm Lieutenant Dogadin's involvement or whether a criminal case will be opened against those searched.

Nursi readers are also facing a similar pattern of raids followed by prosecution under anti-extremism legislation, with foreign nationals particularly vulnerable. Merazhov of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Asian Part of Russia told Forum 18 on 6 April that he thinks the situation is getting "worse". Six Nursi readers are currently being prosecuted in Russia, and the most recent raids took place at the end of March.

Merazhov also said that foreigners are being targeted more than Russian citizens "because they are easy to deport." According to a police report filed on 30 March, seen by Forum 18, a flat in Yaroslavl north-east of Moscow was searched by security services on that day. The search followed reports that inhabitants had extremist materials.

The raid on the property, which has been rented by Azerbaijani national Kamil Isaev for over a year, lasted over two hours. Before searching the property, those present were read their rights and shown a copy of a court order permitting the search. At the time of the raid another Azeri citizen, Ramzi Ramazanov, was present, as well as Uzbek citizen Golibzhon Karimov. Following the raid Karimov's passport and migration card were confiscated by police. The authorities issued him with a certificate valid until 16 April explaining this.

Officers confiscated books in Russian and Turkish, including some Nursi texts, as well as religious pamphlets and notebooks and a computer. Isaev told the authorities that all the books had been purchased by him, some in Turkey and Azerbaijan.

A spokesperson for the police in the Lenin District of Yaroslavl told Forum 18 on 6 April that the authorities are currently

examining confiscated materials. "I cannot tell you yet whether a criminal case will be brought," said the spokesperson, who would not give their name.

As yet there have been no raids on Jehovah's Witnesses in April, Martynov told Forum 18 on 13 April. Forum 18 is not aware of any raids on Nursi readers taking place in April.

Trials

Facing possible imprisonment for alleged distribution of works on the Federal List of Extremist Materials is Jehovah's Witness Aleksandr Kalistratov, who insists he has done nothing wrong. Other court cases instigated following raids on Nursi readers include the prosecution of four people in Krasnoyarsk and the trial of Ziyavdin Dapayev in Dagestan. Nursi reader and Azerbaijani national Rashid Abdulov is also facing prosecution in Ulyanovsk after a raid on his flat (see F18News 11 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1539).

A verdict in the long-running Kalistratov trial is due on 14 April, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. A court spokesperson refused to give any further details of the Dapayev case to Forum 18 on 6 April 2011.

Ilham Islamli was the first Nursi reader to be convicted of extremism charges on 18 August 2010 (see F18News 26 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1480).

In Tambov, south east of Moscow, a criminal case was opened against Jehovah's Witness Pavel Stregachev on 17 January 2011. He stands accused of inciting religious hatred under Article 282 of the Criminal Code. The prosecutor initially refused to accept the case, calling for further investigation. A court official refused to provide more details to Forum 18 on 6 April.

A spokesperson for the police in the Lenin district of Tambov, would not give their name, confirmed on 6 April to Forum 18 that "our investigation began in spring last year". This was when there were three raids, the first such raids on Jehovah's Witness homes since the Soviet era. The raids included extensive searches for what a March 2010 order by Tambov's Lenin District Court described as "items, literature, memory sticks with propaganda of religious hatred" and "other documents, showing the religious organisation's activity" (see F18News 22 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1424).

Some of those prosecuted, such as Jehovah's Witness Lyubov Belimova, have received relatively light punishments for distributing "extremist" literature. On 18 March the Tver Central District Court, north of Moscow, upheld a decision by the city's Central Magistrate's Court to fine her 1000 Roubles (193 Norwegian Kroner, 25 Euros, or 36 US Dollars), and to confiscate and destroy printed materials. The original case followed surveillance of the local Jehovah's Witnesses community, following which Belimova was prosecuted for distributing 38 items of "extremist" material from 1 February 2010 to 11 October 2010.

Increasing pressure against religious literature distribution

These raids and trials take place at the same time as proposed legal amendments that would ban anyone, except registered religious organisations, from distributing religious literature. These have received initial backing from the Duma's Committee on Social and Religious Organisations, the first time such amendments have got so far (see F18News 24 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1555).

The proposed new restrictions on literature distribution follow increased controls on religious activity, focusing on restricting the free publication and distribution of religious literature. Citing the need to crack down on alleged "extremism", a growing number of religious publications by Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims (especially works by the Muslim theologian Said Nursi) have been banned by local courts (see F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

Demands for intrusive information

The March 2010 raids on and searches of Jehovah's Witnesses in Tambov are part of a growing trend for the authorities to use extremism legislation to gather information about religious organisations – even if there is no legal obligation to provide such information (see F18News 1 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1548).

Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Nursi readers have been targeted in ways that suggest that their believers and communities are closely watched by the police and FSB security service – both within and outside their communities. Internal government documents, from a wide geographic spread of regions, reveal that the campaign against both groups of religious believers is co-ordinated at a high level. Private employers and public libraries have also been ordered to co-operate in the campaign (see F18News 12 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1478).

In the far eastern Republic of Sakha the authorities have sent a questionnaire demanding intrusive information from churches belonging to the Association of Evangelical Christian Churches of the republic. A spokesperson for the group told Forum 18 on 8 April that a number of its member churches have received a questionnaire from the local police's Centre for Combating Extremism.

The questionnaire asked for details of: their source of financing; the church leader or pastor's contact details and place of residence; a list of locations where worship services take place; the number of people attending these services; whether religious literature is distributed; a photograph of the director; when the most recent missionaries to arrive did so, where they operate and their aims; whether the community operates Sunday schools or children's summer camps; and if so how many children attend these groups and their personal details.

A spokesperson for the local police confirmed to Forum 18 on 8 April that the police are gathering information on the religious organisations. However, they refused to answer questions on how this information will be used, or whether criminal cases will be opened against those questioned.

This investigation into Protestants appears to be limited to Sakha.

Disinformation

Nursi readers are also being linked to the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). On 31 March 2011 Russian newspaper Izvestiya quoted former Turkish MIT secret police official Nuri Gündes. He claims that "Nurdzhular" allowed 130 CIA agents to work for it in Central Asia in the 1990s. Other Russian media outlets also reported these claims.

The claims are strongly contested in Turkey, and also by some retired CIA officials, and were briskly dismissed to Forum 18 by Merazhov of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Asian Part of Russia as "nonsense". Gündes himself has been questioned as part of the Ergenekon investigations into a plot to overthrow the Turkish government (see F18News 22 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1434).

"Nurdzhular" - which Nursi readers insist does not exist - was 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).

Rhetoric from senior officials has attempted to link Nursi readers with terrorism (see F18News 29 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1504). (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

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