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RUSSIA: Eight readers of Islamic theologian arrested

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Shirazi Bekirov – a reader of Islamic theologian Said Nursi – has been under arrest in St Petersburg since his home in the city was raided by the FSB security service late on 2 March, a fellow Nursi reader told Forum 18 News Service. Six other homes were also raided, more than ten people were briefly detained and thousands of Nursi's books were seized. Bekirov stands accused of organising the activity of banned "extremist" organisation, "Nurdzhular", an organisation Nursi readers insist does not exist. He faces up to three years' imprisonment if convicted. An Azeri named "Elnur" is among seven Nursi readers in detention in Russia's Perm Region since at least May after police and FSB raids on private homes, in which thousands of copies of Nursi's works were seized. A spokesperson for Volga Federal District's Interior Ministry told Forum 18 that all seven suspects are still in detention - "Their question is still being decided" – and that they have not yet been formally charged. He refused to name those detained.

Eight readers of Islamic theologian Said Nursi are being held in prolonged detention after law enforcement raids in St Petersburg and the Urals region of Perm, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Unconfirmed reports claim an unspecified number of similar detentions in three other Russian locations.

In one, however – the Black Sea port of Anapa – court and police representatives have told Forum 18 they are unaware of such measures (see below).

The newest "extremism" detentions come as a landmark trial of two Nursi readers in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk ended in their one-year suspended prison sentences (see F18News 18 June 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1848).

In all the above cases, Nursi readers are accused or suspected of organising or participating in banned "extremist" organisation "Nurdzhular" (a russification of "Nurcular", Turkish for "Nursi followers"). The harshest possible punishment – for organising - is three years in prison (Criminal Code, Article 282.2, Part 1). Nursi readers deny they form part of any organisation (see Forum 18's Russia "Extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724).

The Supreme Court's April 2008 decision banning "Nurdzhular" – and so underpinning all these cases - has finally been released as part of the case material in Novosibirsk (see F18News 20 June 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1849).

From a Turkish Sufi background, Said Nursi (1876-1960) attempted to integrate Islamic and modern scientific thought. While Nursi spent many years in internal exile and prison under the rigidly secularist regime of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, his works are now freely read in Turkey.

Forum 18 finds the primary cause of Russia's anti-Nursi campaign to be state opposition to "foreign" spiritual and cultural influence (see F18News 5 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1811).

In the Black Sea coast town of Taganrog, meanwhile, another key trial for involvement in a banned "extremist" organisation – the local Jehovah's Witness congregation – began in May against 16 Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 18 June 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1848).

St Petersburg

Arrested in St Petersburg on 3 March, Nursi reader Shirazi Bekirov has now been detained for more than three and a half months, fellow Nursi reader Sergei Mikhailov told Forum 18 on 20 June. Bekirov stands accused of organising the activity of banned "extremist" organisation, "Nurdzhular" (Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1).

Seen by Forum 18, a 4 March order signed by Judge Vsevolod Dvorovenko of St Petersburg's Nevsky District Court authorised Bekirov's detention until 25 April. Seen by Forum 18, a 23 April order signed by Judge Mikhail Kharitonov of Nevsky District Court prolonged Bekirov's detention until 28 June. On 19 June Bekirov lost an appeal against this order, Mikhailov told Forum 18. St Petersburg City Court's website confirms that Bekirov's appeal was rejected by its Judge Yevgeny Dorozhinsky on 19 June.

The maximum standard period for pre-trial detention is six months (Criminal-Procedural Code, Article 109, Part 2).

A spokesperson at Detention Centre No.3 in St Petersburg - where Bekirov was assigned according to his case material - refused to confirm Bekirov's detention there on 24 June. "We don't give out such information," he told Forum 18.

Detention followed raid

Bekirov's detention followed a 2 March evening raid on his rented apartment by the FSB security service, Mikhailov told Forum 18. A total of ten men – one Turkmen, four Azerbaijani and five Russian citizens – were detained as members of "Nurdzhular", according to a 4 March report by Rosbalt news agency. Six more homes and a garage were also raided and some 2,000 Nursi titles seized, according to Mikhailov, but measures were not brought against anyone except Bekirov.

The 4 March court order maintains that detention is necessary because Bekirov holds dual Russian-Azerbaijani citizenship, periodically visits "Azerbaijan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other countries of the Arab world", and intended to travel to Turkey on 4 March. If not held in detention, the order adds, Bekirov could destroy evidence, exert pressure on witnesses as their "ideological leader" or go into hiding.

The order also notes that Bekirov appealed for milder restrictions, citing his lack of a criminal record. He protested that he intended to visit Turkey for only a week before returning to Russia, and that he had tried to annul his Azerbaijani citizenship but received no response from Azerbaijan's consulate.

Forum 18 has also seen Bekirov's case material, drawn up by the Investigation Service of St Petersburg and Leningrad Region's FSB Department. The Service's 27 February report maintains that Bekirov - under surveillance since August 2011 - distributed Nursi literature at international book fairs in St Petersburg in April 2012 and Kiev (Ukraine) in November 2011.

Having questioned "a specialist with corresponding cultural knowledge", the FSB further established that "Nurdzhular" members are "united by adherence to Said Nursi's ideas", and that their main purpose is "missionary activity" through "discussions on religious topics" in private homes.

The Investigation Service's 28 February order opening the "Nurdzhular" case maintains that Bekirov and unidentified persons organised "conspiratorial gatherings" at which "Risale-i Nur", Nursi's Koranic commentary, was read. The Service's 11 March charges against Bekirov further maintain that he "propagandised ideas and materials that are the ideological source" of "Nurdzhular" - specifically, parts of "Risale-i Nur" - at his home on Wednesday and Sunday evenings.

Law enforcement agents now routinely equate readership of Nursi with membership of "Nurdzhular". Yet Forum 18 has found no connection between the few concrete reasons offered by Russian courts for banning Nursi literature – such as Nursi's reference to non-Muslims as "empty-talkers" - and the broader state allegations regarding "Nurdzhular" (see F18News 5 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1811).

Moscow's Koptevo District Court ruled translations of 14 parts of "Risale-i Nur" ("Messages of Light") "extremist" in May 2007. Subsequently added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials, their distribution is banned throughout Russia (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

A further two translations of parts of "Risale-i Nur" ruled "extremist" by district courts in Krasnoyarsk and St Petersburg were added to the Federal List in January 2013 (see F18News 19 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1803).

Even Russia's most pro-Kremlin Muslim leader, Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin, pronounced "Risale-i Nur" to be "far from religious extremism and fanaticism" in 2001 (see F18News 5 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1811).

As of 21 June, the Federal List ran to 1,920 titles, including Nursi and other Muslim, Jehovah's Witness and Falun Gong publications.

Familiar rhetoric

Accompanied by video provided by St Petersburg and Leningrad Regional FSB, the Rosbalt report of the 2 March raid on Bekirov's flat suggested there were "grounds to suppose the extremists would resist." It also maintained that members of "Nurdzhular" had supported terrorism in both Chechnya and Turkey. Security agency sources for a similar, 5 March report in Rossiiskaya Gazeta newspaper "hinted confidentially and very unofficially that participants in this sect were carrying out the tasks of Turkish intelligence and the CIA".

While such rhetoric is also commonly heard from Russian government representatives, these claims are nowhere substantiated in the relevant court decisions first banning Nursi literature and later prosecuting alleged "Nurdzhular" members, Forum 18 notes (see F18News 5 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1811).

Follow-up searches by FSB officers took place in various locations of St Petersburg and the surrounding Leningrad Region on 4 April. "Again extremist literature was taken," the Regional FSB told Interfax news agency the following day. "As part of the [criminal] case, two citizens of Azerbaijan were brought to us for questioning. They were released after interrogation."

FSB officers said the two unnamed Azerbaijanis had just arrived in St Petersburg to find out what had happened to and to support the arrested Bekirov, as well as "to revive the organisation".

Perm Region

In another "Nurdzhular" criminal case opened under Article 282.2 by Volga Federal District's Interior Ministry, local police and FSB officers detained seven people on the territory of Perm Region, the Ministry reported on 21 May. The operation also seized 4,860 "extremist" books and brochures, as well as digital material, computer equipment and telephones.

As part of the same investigation, local police and FSB simultaneously detained an unspecified number of people in Anapa (Krasnodar Region), Rostov-on-Don and St Petersburg, according to the Ministry and similar Russian media reports. Here, the law enforcement agents confiscated 1,200 "extremist" books, digital material, computer equipment and "printed publications and typed texts with religious content in Arabic". Two of those detained were released under a travel ban [podpiska o nevyезде].

A spokesperson for Volga Federal District's Interior Ministry told Forum 18 on 17 June that all seven suspects in Perm Region were still in detention - "Their question is still being decided" – and that they had not yet been formally charged. He further confirmed that the relevant case was opened under both Part 1 (organisation of) and Part 2 (participation in) a banned "extremist" organisation (Criminal Code, Article 282.2). The spokesperson was unable to provide further details.

The seven Perm Region detainees are one Turkish, three Azerbaijani and three Russian citizens, Kommersant newspaper reported on 21 May. The law enforcement agencies refused to disclose their names, according to the Kommersant report, noting only that the Turkish citizen ran timber businesses and the Azerbaijanis sold fur coats at market while also distributing "extremist" literature.

Russian media footage showed law enforcement agents visiting a fur coat shop in Perm, though gave no date for the raid. At a mobile telephone number for the shop, which Forum 18 has identified, a man told Forum 18 on 20 June that the number earlier belonged to an Azeri named "Elnur" who was currently in detention. He was unable to provide further details.

Nursi readers in various parts of Russia were also unable to provide details on this case when contacted by Forum 18. The original Interior Ministry report is too general to pinpoint detentions in the major cities of Rostov-on-Don and St Petersburg, where the timing and quantity of literature seized appear distinct from the Bekirov case.

In Anapa, however, neither the District Court nor Municipal Court knew anything about local "Nurdzhular" detentions when contacted by Forum 18 on 19 June. The District Court spokesperson confirmed to Forum 18 that one of these two courts would have authorised such detentions. The Municipal Court spokesperson suggested local police would be familiar with the case if it had not yet been referred to a court.

A spokesperson at Anapa Police Department told Forum 18 on 19 June that the Department had no information about local "Nurdzhular" detentions. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

An analysis of the way that the Russian authorities have used the Pussy Riot case to intensify restrictions on freedom of religion or belief is at F18News 15 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1754.

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.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.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.

More 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/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

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