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UZBEKISTAN: Russian religious news website blocked

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

One of the more prominent Russian-language religious news websites, Portal-credo.ru, is blocked in Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has found. Tests in the Uzbek capital Tashkent showed that the religious news website was inaccessible. Blocking is done at the instigation of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. Internet service providers (ISPs) in Uzbekistan blame the blocking of sites on Uznet, owned by the state provider Uzbektelecom and through which all ISPs have to connect to the internet. Uznet insists that sites are already blocked by the NSS. "We don't block websites – this is done by the NSS secret police. The NSS open the connections for us – they have all the equipment there," an Uznet employee told Forum 18. Uzbekistan has long barred access to more websites than any other Central Asian country, including websites such as Centrasia.ru, Ferghana.ru and Uznews.net. All these websites carry some coverage of religious affairs.

In addition to the growing number of political, opposition and regional news websites and weblogs blocked to internet users in Uzbekistan, the authorities have now added one of Russia's more prominent religious news websites, Forum 18 News Service has found. Tests in several locations in the capital Tashkent during March showed that the Russian-language religious news website <http://www.portal-credo.ru> was inaccessible on every occasion. Blocking is done at the instigation of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police.

"We didn't know our site was blocked in Uzbekistan," Aleksandr Soldatov, chief editor of Portal-credo.ru, told Forum 18 on 10 April. "It's quite possible that this has been done for political reasons – the government might view our site as dangerous."

Other internet companies in Uzbekistan blame the blocking of sites on Uznet, which is owned by the state provider Uzbektelecom and through which all other internet service providers (ISPs) in Uzbekistan have to connect to the internet. "We don't block any websites," a member of the technical department of the Tashkent-based ISP Sarkor-Telecom told Forum 18 on 9 April. "It's all done by Uznet. These sites are blocked for what they say are security reasons. Many political and religious sites are blocked - no-one can say how many."

However, the technical department at Uznet insisted that sites are already blocked before it has access to international connections. "We don't block websites – this is done by the NSS secret police. The NSS open the connections for us – they have all the equipment there," one Uznet employee told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 9 April. "You'd better ask them. We provide a reliable service allowing access to all sites that we have access to."

Forum 18 was unable to reach the press department of the NSS to find out why it is blocking access to foreign-based websites. The telephone went unanswered on 9 April. Nor was anyone available at the government's Committee for Religious Affairs. The man who answered the phone on 9 April told Forum 18 that committee specialist Begzot Kadyrov was away on a work trip and would not be back until 16 April and that no-one else was available.

Authoritarian Uzbekistan bars more websites than probably any other country in Central Asia. Among regional news websites blocked are [and](#), as well as independent news sites based abroad such as [that](#) concentrate on developments within the country. All these sites carry some coverage of religious affairs.

On 20 March [carried](#) an extensive original report in Uzbek, Russian and English of the way the Uzbek authorities are using state-controlled Muslim leaders to push government policy among the Muslim population. On 2 April, the same website carried an analysis of a leaked copy of the July 2006 list of approved and banned religious books, audio- and video-recordings as drawn up by the government's Religious Affairs Committee, which it argued proved the total government control over all religious material that people in Uzbekistan are allowed to have access to. The website carried images of the 29-page report in full.

Meanwhile, on 1 February, [carried](#) an original report about secret police surveillance of students at the government-sponsored Islamic University in Tashkent.

By contrast, the Moscow-based <http://www.portal-credo.ru> is solely devoted to religious news, carrying a wide variety of articles – almost entirely in Russian – about religious life and events around the world from a wide variety of sources. It often translates into

Russian or summarises in Russian Forum 18's articles on religious freedom issues in the region. The site does not publish news in Uzbek or any other Central Asian language.

Portal-credo.ru's own statistics show the difficulties of access from Uzbekistan, the most populous country in Central Asia. Figures from a three-week period from late February to mid-March – posted on their site by their programmer, Mark Gondelman - show just 13 readers from Uzbekistan, fewer than from Kuwait, Denmark, Croatia or Turkey despite the many millions in Uzbekistan who read Russian. By contrast, the site had 167 visitors from neighbouring Kazakhstan and even 24 from Tajikistan, a much smaller and poorer country.

The Uzbek authorities have barred access since summer 2003 to the US-based Islamic radical site, (see F18News 19 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=86). Describing itself as "the site of the Muslims of Uzbekistan" and published in four languages, Uzbek, Arabic, Russian and English, the site contains Muslim and general news.

"This site contains the latest social and political developments in Uzbekistan and Central Asia, and their analysis, the facts about human rights violations and crimes that are committed against Muslims in the region," the site's owners claim. "It seeks to express the dreams and aspirations of the people who live under the dictatorship of the President Karimov. It succeeds in disclosing all the dodges of the enemies of God and challenges the people to fight against the tyranny. Most of all, it educates the people on the Islamic knowledge and tries to satisfy their spiritual needs."

Blocked for even longer has been , a British-based site of the radical Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is banned in Uzbekistan. For an account of Hizb ut-Tahrir's views, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170.

Although a growing number of religious communities within Uzbekistan have their own websites, low internet usage and tight political controls over it mean that such websites have failed to take on the important role in religious news and debate that they have in Russia or Kazakhstan.

With the government intent on preventing the internet developing into a mobilising force for the opposition, retaliation on those who visit banned websites can be severe. One source told Forum 18 that a year or so ago in his Tashkent mahalla (city district), a near neighbour tried to log on at home to an opposition website. Within fifteen minutes the NSS secret police had arrived at his home to warn him not to access such sites. Internet cafes have long displayed notices warning users not to access "religious or pornographic sites".

Sources who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 that the NSS secret police also uses the internet to hunt for political activists and religious believers within Uzbekistan conducting activity it does not like. Sources told Forum 18 of a case several years ago when some South Koreans working for a non-governmental organisation in Uzbekistan had posted information about their religious activity while in the country on a Korean-language website. The NSS had discovered what had been published and took action against the individuals.

As well as controlling internet access, state control of all printed religious literature has in the past year been intensified (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805). Along with this, the state-run media's encouragement of intolerance against religious minorities has been stepped up (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890), as has a propaganda offensive to deny that Uzbekistan violates religious freedom (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=891). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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