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RUSSIA: Islamic extremists, real and imagined

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Russia's pursuit of religious and other extremists has intensified with recent amendments to the Extremism, Media and other laws, Forum 18 News Service notes. The legal definition of incitement to religious hatred is no longer restricted to activity involving violence or the threat of violence. Journalists describing a religious or other organisation that has been banned as extremist must now state this or face a heavy fine. Some prominent Russian Muslim representatives are deeply unhappy about state policy on extremism. They allege that justice has been misapplied in some recent trials and that, at the middle and lower tiers of authority, "state policy has become distorted and turned into the opposite of what it is meant to be." Mikhail Ostrovsky of the Presidential Administration responded that most of the cases raised lie within the competency of the judiciary and urged Muslims to refer concrete violations to the law enforcement agencies "in the prescribed manner". Opinion on Islamic extremism in Russia is polarised, being influenced by shifting and ambiguous definitions, rivalry between Islamic groups and state preferences for some Muslim organisations over others.

Russia's pursuit of religious and other extremists intensified on 26 July, when President Vladimir Putin signed amendments to the Extremism, Media and other laws. The broadened definition of extremism includes "obstruction of the lawful activity (..) of social, religious or other organisations", and incitement to religious hatred now does not need to be accompanied by violence or the threat of violence. If journalists describing a religious or other organisation that has been banned as extremist do not state this, they now face a heavy fine

Heralded as improvements to the state's policy against extremism, the latest changes come only a year after the 2002 Extremism Law's definition of the offence was broadened to encompass "violation of the rights and freedoms of the person and citizen" and "harm to the health or property of citizens in connection with their beliefs". Previously, the definition centred upon such acts of treason as undermining state security and seizing state power.

Asked whether the Kremlin believes the new amendments will make state policy against Islamic extremism more effective - and whether the judicial system has applied the 2002 Extremism Law correctly so far - a secretary at the Presidential Administration's Press Office told Forum 18 on 7 August that no one was currently available to give a response. Contacted again on 8 August, she maintained that "we don't have any information about that right now." Russia's parliament, which approved the amendments on 6 July, is currently in recess.

Some believe the state's policy on extremism is now resulting in "blatant cases of persecution of Muslims". So wrote a group of prominent Islamic representatives to President Putin - including two co-chairmen of the Council of Muftis, Nafigulla Ashirov and Mukaddas Bibarsov, and Geidar Dzhemal of the Moscow-based Islamic Committee. Published in Russian daily Izvestiya on 5 March 2007, their open letter alleges that justice has been misapplied in a number of recent extremism trials, including the ban on the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981) and the prosecution of Muslim activist Mansur Shangareyev (see F18News 8 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=723). At the middle and lower tiers of authority, the letter's authors maintain, "state policy has become distorted and turned into the opposite of what it is meant to be." Over 3,000 Muslims in some ten Russian regions signed in support.

"Both state and society have an interest in the issues which you raise in your letter being dealt with in an objective manner," an assistant director of internal policy within the Presidential Administration assured the Islamic representatives in his 26 April reply. Pointing out that most of the cases raised lie within the competency of the judiciary, however, Mikhail Ostrovsky insists that "justice in Russia may be administered only by a court; courts are independent and subject only to the Constitution and federal law." He thus urges Muslims to refer any concrete violations to the law enforcement agencies, "in the prescribed manner".

The Presidential Administration official also warns that "there has recently been an increase in cases in which people accused of criminal offences declare themselves to be 'prisoners of conscience' and 'victims of ethnic and religious oppression'. (..) Such action frequently disorients the public, creates non-objective public opinion, hampers case investigations and may lead to judicial error."

Opinion is thus polarised over the extent – and even existence - of Islamic extremism in Russia, particularly outside the northern Caucasus. As elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, the belief in the legitimacy of violence in the pursuit of Islamic ideals is commonly referred to as "Wahhabism", after Mohammed ibn Abdul-Wahhab, whose teachings form the religious basis of the present-day kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The eighteenth-century theologian's "Book of Monotheism" is currently the only theological work on Russia's 14 July 2007 federal list of banned extremist materials.

The head of the FSB security service in the Urals region of Chelyabinsk, for example, was cited by Russian news agency Interfax in March 2006 as saying that "the expansion of Wahhabism is spreading to Russia in stages, according to a certain plan". Following the first stage – "distribution of Wahhabi literature and leaflets in our region", the second – "the formation of missionary groups and the spread of anti-state ideology among their members" – has begun, according to Aleksandr Krivyakov. The final stage of the alleged plan, he maintained, is the organisation of mass disorder and the seizure of power.

The author of two books on the recent history of the Islamic community in Russia, Roman Silantsev has similarly maintained to religious affairs newspaper supplement NG-Religii that the Islamic extremist threat is pervasive. Meaning by Wahhabism "any fundamentalist Islamic trend which presupposes the annihilation of people only because they are of another belief", Silantsev remarked that the scale of its dissemination in Russia – outside the northern Caucasus – "is simply shocking. (...) If the state doesn't intervene and support its true allies in the Muslim community, you can forget about interreligious peace." An armed conflict would begin in two to three years, he suggested, in an interview published on 16 May 2007.

By contrast, Marat Murtazin, who is vice-chairman to Mufti Ravil Gainutdin of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of European Russia (SDMER), believes that "very few people want to create an Islamic state here." Speaking to Forum 18 in March 2007, he criticised common usage of the term "Wahhabism". "Anyone can be labelled with it. You can call me a Wahhabi, but my convictions don't depend upon what you say I am." In Murtazin's view, state representatives usually do not know what Wahhabism is. "It reminds me of the 1930s – 'enemy of the people' or 'Trotskyist'. What exactly is a Trotskyist?"

The way in which the term is used can indeed cast doubt upon the soundness of a particular accusation. In September 2004, for example, Governor Aleksandr Chernogorov of Stavropol Region yoked Wahhabism with "Jehovism" – a Soviet-era term for the Jehovah's Witnesses faith – in describing the main threat to "those confessions which provide the foundation of civil peace" (see F18News 29 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=464). A Russian-language website analysing the political situation in the republic of Mari-El, News12.info claimed in December 2005 that Mari nationalists were assisting "emissaries of radical Islamists [who] recently tried to split the Muslim community of Mari-El (...) and turn the Muslim diaspora of Mari-El towards fahabism [sic]." Paganism is in fact the religious tradition normally associated with the Mari nationalist movement.

Even Vladimir Putin has modified his use of the term "Wahhabism" during the course of his presidency. Questioned about the situation in Chechnya a year into Russia's second military operation in the rebel republic by French television channels TF1 and France 3, he explained that one of the reasons for ordering in troops in 1999 was "ideological aggression from what is known as Wahhabism". In January 2006, however, Interfax news agency cited him as stating that "Wahhabism in itself does not pose any threat, but distortion of the norms of Islam, of Wahhabism, this of course cannot be viewed as anything other than calling for terrorism."

A few months beforehand, in October 2005, Gazeta.ru reported that the Presidential Administration had circulated to central television stations a list of terms to be used when covering conflict in the northern Caucasus. "Wahhabi" should be replaced by "Islamic extremist", "jihad" by "diversional-terrorist activity" and "Chechen terrorism" by "international terrorism", the Russian news website stated.

If the terminology is flexible, so is its context. "People use it if they want to take out an ideological opponent," Marat Murtazin of SDMER told Forum 18. In part, he stressed, this is the fault of Muslims themselves.

In October 2001, Mufti Talgat Tadzhuddin told Russian daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta that he was categorically opposed to forming a joint council with the "so-called" Council of Muftis of Russia (which includes SDMER) because its members "include organisations transmitting Wahhabi ideas over the past ten years". Tadzhuddin has led the main rival organisation to the Council of Muftis, the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims (CSDM), since 1980. On 16 November 2006 he issued a decree ordering local CSDM representatives not to permit anyone to preach or perform rites without his personal permission due to appearances in mosques of "various guest artists preaching extremist interpretations of the peaceful true Islamic faith".

Such rivalry typically underpins accusations of extremism. The December 2005 charges against Mansur Shangareyev maintained that he and a local Astrakhan imam, Rustam Kenzhaliyev, invited "Hindus [sic] and immigrants from the Caucasus propagandising radical Islam – specifically 'Wahhabism' – who wore untrimmed long beards and socks tucked into their trousers [sic], and attempted, with their help, to instil the ideas of radical Islam into the villagers."

On 20 April 2005, the Russian Islamic affairs website Islam.ru pointed out that the mufti of Astrakhan region, Nazymbek Ilyazov, had sacked Rustam Kenzhaliyev from his post as imam for trying to re-register his mosque with SDMER. Ilyazov's Astrakhan Regional Spiritual Directorate of Muslims is affiliated to CSDM. The website also cited Kenzhaliyev as stating that before his arrest

Mansur Shangareyev had been gathering a petition to create a local Muslim forum that might express lack of confidence in Ilyazov (see F18News 8 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=723).

Similarly, when police searched the flat of the SDMER-affiliated mufti of Cheboksary (Chuvashia Republic), Airat Khaibullov, CSDM cited "the real mufti of Chuvashia", Albir Krganov, as stressing that Khaibullov had long ago been expelled from its Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Chuvashia. In his statement following the raid published by Islam-Info.ru Russian Islamic affairs website in January 2005, Khaibullov stated that police had "naturally found nothing" at his flat. As Cheboksary mufti for over ten years, he added, his guiding principles had always been "tolerance and patriotism towards our Russian Homeland". In July 2006 the Sova Centre's website <http://www.sova-center.ru> reported that police detained six young Muslim preachers from Tatarstan in a Chuvash village at the request of Mufti Krganov. Suspected of being Wahhabis, the group was held for 72 hours before being expelled from Chuvashia.

A further factor in such disputes, as Islam.ru has noted, is state preference for one or other Muslim grouping. At a February 2005 meeting, according to the website, regional administration representatives discussed the transfer of Ulyanovsk's central mosque from its community to the leader of the region's CSDM-affiliated spiritual directorate. The federal inspector to Ulyanovsk region, Igor Zhuravlev, reportedly told community elders: "If you intend to leave the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims, that means you have your own religion. So call yourselves a sect, and we, that is, the state, will relate to you as a sect".

Days before searching the SDMER-affiliated Cheboksary mufti's flat in early 2005, police also raided the home of his assistant, Farid Sanzypov, claiming him to be a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir. A self-styled international Islamic political party which claims to reject violence but has praised suicide bombers, Russia's Supreme Court banned Hizb ut-Tahrir as a terrorist organisation on 14 February 2003. Forum 18 notes the presence in Hizb ut-Tahrir publications of violently antisemitic views, and its denial of key rights including religious freedom (see F18News 10 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=755).

Some Russian Muslims charged with membership of Hizb ut-Tahrir since the ban, however, have maintained that they are nothing to do with the organisation and are being persecuted for their religious beliefs. While it is clearly impossible to state definitively whether this is the case, aspects of the authorities' treatment of suspects raise concerns. One example is the alleged substitution of a page in a defendant's police statement with another saying that he belongs to Hizb ut-Tahrir (see F18News 18 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=761).

Key to prosecutions of alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members are literary analyses employing a very loose interpretation of a definition of extremism in the 2002 Law, "propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens on the basis of their attitude towards religion". As part of the evidence in a recent trial in Tobolsk (Tyumen Region), for example, one former scientific atheism lecturer maintained that confiscated literature "propagandises the idea of superiority of Islam, and therefore Muslims, over other religions and the people who adhere to them" (see F18News 20 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=765).

A similar approach characterised the Moscow trial that banned the works of moderate Turkish theologian Said Nursi (1876-1960) as extremist on 21 May 2007. Russia's Human Rights Ombudsman denounced the case even before the verdict, warning that "it is very important that we do not allow interference in the convictions and beliefs of millions of citizens on the poorly grounded, unproven pretext of fighting against extremism" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

The author Roman Silantyev, however, believes that the Russian state must intervene in Islamic education as part of the fight against extremism. The authorities, as well as Muslims themselves, are responsible for it being "in a catastrophic state", he told NG-Religii. Since the state failed to deal with the problem in good time, he explained, Russian Muslims have been obliged to pursue Islamic studies abroad. Consequently, in Silantyev's view, over the past 19 years "no [Muslim] personnel other than Wahhabis" have been trained to take over from Russia's ageing generation of imams.

Latterly, officials have supported this view. At a 26 December 2006 meeting with representatives of the Public Chamber, the First Vice-chairman of the FSB security service insisted his organisation would oppose the schooling in extremist activity of Russian citizens at foreign madrassahs. "We're not against study," remarked General Vladimir Pronichev, as cited by Interfax news agency, "but they [the foreign madrassahs] turn them [Russian Muslims] against other faiths and towards extremism".

In 2005, according to Izvestiya newspaper, top presidential aide Vyacheslav Surkov and the Council of Muftis began to co-ordinate a programme which will prepare Muslim clergy and specialists on Islam "with a positive view of Russia" in both state universities and institutions of higher Islamic education.

SDMER's Marat Murtazin, who is also rector of Moscow Islamic University, agrees that the post-Soviet phenomenon of young Russian Muslims studying abroad was "really bad", but does not blame state policy. "It's the Muslims themselves," he explained to Forum 18. "They forget that Muslims in our country have their own path; Islam came here in 910, before Christianity." Practices in Islamic countries cannot simply be adopted in Russia, he maintained. "We live in a different society; Ukrainian alongside Chechen, Tatar alongside Jew." Despite this, young Russian Muslims who study abroad "think that only they are right, that the tradition they've studied is the only way." When they first return to Russia, according to Murtazin, they insist that everything must change. "But - when they see that it doesn't work - they do assimilate again." (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News
http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947

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 printer-friendly map of Russia is available at
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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