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RUSSIA: Jehovah's Witness tracts feared harmful in asbestos town

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

The court in the Urals town of Asbest chose not to consider a lawsuit accusing the Jehovah's Witnesses of distributing "extremist" religious literature, as an assessment by FSB security service specialists did not qualify as evidence, the town's acting Public Prosecutor Aleksei Almayev told Forum 18 News Service. However, he said a criminal investigation is continuing and an analysis of several Jehovah's Witness publications – including their magazine "Watchtower" - is being conducted by a local university. "And when we file suit again, we think the court will be more sympathetic." The Prosecutor's Office warning to Asbest's Jehovah's Witnesses claims the publications are "overtly, clearly and directly aimed at inciting hatred, propaganda of exclusivity and humiliation of human dignity on account of a person's attitude towards religion". It claims that the Jehovah's Witnesses' "aggression" will incite others to react to "blasphemous pronouncements on things they consider sacred". If found "extremist" by Asbest court, the publications will be added to the ever-lengthening Federal List of Extremist Materials, which already includes traditional Mari pagan and Muslim literature. Those distributing literature on this list anywhere in Russia risk a five-year prison term.

The Public Prosecutor of the small asbestos-mining town of Asbest in Sverdlovsk Region is pressing for a ban on Jehovah's Witness literature, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. If Asbest Town Court – or any other Russian court – finds Jehovah's Witness publications extremist, their addition to the Federal List of Extremist Materials would extend a ban on their distribution to the whole of Russia. Jehovah's Witnesses continuing to hand out the texts would risk a five-year prison term under Article 282 of the Criminal Code.

The move further suggests a widening of the net in the application of religious extremism charges. Initially they were used against alleged members of the shadowy radical Islamist political movement Hizb ut-Tahrir (see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170 for an outline of its views). However, Jehovah's Witnesses, traditional Mari pagans and Tatar-Turkish schools are the latest targets (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136).

Asbest Town Court chose not to review a 10 June suit charging local Jehovah's Witnesses with distribution of extremist religious literature because an assessment conducted by FSB security service specialists did not qualify as evidence, Asbest's acting Public Prosecutor Aleksei Almayev explained to Forum 18 on 11 July. As part of the continuing criminal investigation, however, Maksim Gorky Urals University is preparing an independent literary analysis due in August, added Almayev. "And when we file suit again, we think the court will be more sympathetic."

With the analysis still incomplete, Almayev declined to comment on the allegedly extremist nature of the Jehovah's Witness texts.

Leonid Masalov, vice-chairman of Asbest Interdistrict Investigation Section of Sverdlovsk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office, acknowledged to Forum 18 on 10 July that his department had overseen the previous examination, but declined to comment on the content of the Jehovah's Witness texts by telephone.

On 21 May, Asbest Public Prosecutor's Office issued two warnings on the distribution of "extremist" literature to the 80-strong local Jehovah's Witness community – an unregistered religious group under the 1997 Religion Law – and the regional religious organisation in Yekaterinburg, Sverdlovsk Region's administrative centre. These formed the basis of the failed 10 June suit, Almayev told Forum 18.

Seen by Forum 18, the Yekaterinburg warning cites a 15 April examination of three publications seized from the Asbest Jehovah's Witnesses – "Watchtower", "Awake!" and "Draw Close to Jehovah". These, the assessment maintains, are "overtly, clearly and directly aimed at inciting hatred, propaganda of exclusivity and humiliation of human dignity on account of a person's attitude towards religion" – all banned under the 2002 Extremism Law.

The publications also "provoke interreligious tension and conflict situations, pitch Jehovahists" – a Soviet-era term for Jehovah's

Witnesses – "against other religions, particularly adherents of the traditional confessions on the territory of the Russian Federation," the warning claims. "Such aggression causes people to react in kind, offended by the Jehovahist publications' blasphemous pronouncements on things they consider sacred." No examples from the texts are given, however.

During a 7 February raid on the Asbest community's rented premises, FSB, police and public prosecutor representatives seized religious literature and questioned group member Igor Ananyin, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Asbest police again questioned Ananyin during house-to-house preaching on 5 June. Confiscating religious publications, they accused him of defying the 21 May warning, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported. Fellow group members Yuliya Andreyeva and Valentina Bykova were also briefly detained.

In the southern city of Rostov-on-Don, the regional court on 10 July began hearing charges – including of distributing extremist religious literature – against a local Jehovah's Witness organisation in the town of Taganrog, Yaroslav Sivulsky of the Jehovah's Witnesses' St Petersburg headquarters told Forum 18 the same day.

In September 2007 Rostov-on-Don Regional Public Prosecutor's Office ordered its local offices to investigate local Jehovah's Witness communities and consider filing applications for their liquidation, partly on the basis of a local expert analysis. This found that texts distributed by the Jehovah's Witnesses – including "Who Really Rules the World?" and "What Does the Bible Really Teach?" – contain "statements humiliating human dignity on account of a person's attitude towards religion" and "elements of propaganda of the exclusivity of one religion over another." The Office equates both of these with extremism, even though the latter does not feature in the 2002 Law's definition of the offence (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136).

Dated 3 September 2007 and viewed by Forum 18, the expert literary analysis by Rostov Centre for Court Studies finds that Jehovah's Witnesses view the world as being under the control of Satan. Established Christianity is understood as "Babylon the Great", the study's author, philologist Igor Lobanov, notes, because its leading clergy participate in corrupt political life and support the military policies of their particular nations. By contrast, finds Lobanov, the Jehovah's Witness movement "is based upon an idea of God's people".

The eight-page expert analysis also cites Jehovah's Witnesses' obligation to help all people, regardless of national identity. Lobanov even writes in bold type that the Jehovah's Witnesses are opposed to interethnic hatred and hostility, and states that their literature "doesn't contain any calls for actions aimed against representatives of 'Babylon the Great'."

Nevertheless, the philologist concludes that Jehovah's Witness literature does "incite hatred towards the Christian world" – even if it does not call for action against it. He also maintains that it contains "statements humiliating human dignity on the principle of one's attitude towards religion and elements of propaganda of the exclusivity of one religion over another." This is because Jehovah's Witnesses are identified with "God's Israel" and their faith as the only true religion, "whereas all other Christian movements are declared satanic," explains Lobanov. "Such statements are undoubtedly capable of humiliating the dignity not only of clergy not belonging to the Jehovah's Witnesses, but also the feelings of ordinary believers."

A spokesperson at the Rostov Centre for Court Studies refused to comment on the analysis to Forum 18 on 26 May.

Previously, rulings on alleged Islamic extremism have relied upon expert literary analyses which commonly confuse a justifiable definition of extremism in the 2002 Law – "propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens according to their attitude towards religion or religious affiliation" (Article 1) - with claiming the superiority of the religion itself. The freedom to make claims about the relative merits of religious or non-religious views is a central part of freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 20 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=765).

Forum 18 has received no response from Rostov-on-Don Regional Public Prosecutor's Office to questions faxed as requested on 26 May, despite a follow-up telephone call.

The publications at issue in Asbest and Rostov-on-Don region are distributed by the Jehovah's Witnesses without impediment in numerous countries.

While it succeeded in banning the Jehovah's Witnesses' Moscow local religious organisation on other grounds in 2004, the Russian capital's Golovinsky District Court failed to find it guilty of extremism (see F18News 25 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=327). The Jehovah's Witnesses sent an appeal against this long-running prosecution to the European Court of Human Rights on 11 December 2001, updated by supplementary material on 15 December 2004. The Court has yet to pronounce on the admissibility of this complaint, however, Matthew Pannell of the Jehovah's Witnesses' St Petersburg told Forum 18 on 9 July.

In September 2004 Aleksandr Chernogorov, until recently Governor of the southern Stavropol Region, linked "Jehovism" with "Wahhabism" – a loose term for Islamic extremism in the former Soviet Union - 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). (END)

For 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, see F18News 26 May 2005 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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