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RUSSIA: Raids continue as doubts grow over Nursi ban

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

Russian customs officials, Prosecutor's Office officials and FSB security service officers are continuing to seize works by Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, most recently in Siberia and Bashkortostan, Forum 18 News Service has found. Russian translations of many of Nursi's works have been banned in Russia, as they have been placed on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Yet local state officials in Tatarstan maintained to Forum 18 that federal accusations against a Tatar-Turkish lycee in the regional capital Kazan that it was linked with "religious extremism" were unfounded. Tatarstan's senior religious affairs official Renat Valiullin also told Forum 18 that the Moscow court decision banning Nursi translations was taken "without any strong expert analysis". Lycee headteacher Marat Fattiyev, who was accused of being a Nursi follower without his having read any of Nursi's works, suggested to Forum 18 that the move followed false information passed to the FSB about the Turkish ultra-nationalist Ergenekon conspiracy. Federal officials have not yet replied to Forum 18's questions about why Tatarstan officials do not agree with the federal claims of "religious extremism".

False claims passed from Turkey to Russia sparked the crackdown on works by moderate Turkish theologian Said Nursi and his followers, Marat Fattiyev, headteacher of a lycee whose entire Turkish staff were consequently forced to leave Russia, has suggested to Forum 18 News Service in the Tatar capital, Kazan. Officials in Tatarstan agree, telling Forum 18 there was no evidence of "religious extremism". But Moscow continues to defend the action against the teachers, and to pursue Nursi followers as an "extremist" and even "terrorist" organisation.

Forum 18 put Tatarstan officials' doubts over the claims of "religious extremism" in relation to the lycee teachers to the General Prosecutor's Office in Moscow. In written questions submitted in the middle of the working day on 14 July, Forum 18 asked why, in the light of these claims, the Turkish teachers were forced to leave Russia in 2008 and why moves are still underway in various parts of the Russian Federation against those who study the works of Said Nursi. Forum 18 had received no response from the General Prosecutor's Office by the end of the working day in Moscow on 16 July.

"Absurd" allegations?

Headteacher Fattiyev, a Turkish speaker, cited recent Turkish media claims by a key witness in the ongoing criminal investigation into Ergenekon, an ultra-nationalist conspiratorial network alleged to exist within, and be seeking to undermine, Turkish state institutions (see F18News 21 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1206). According to these claims, highly placed Ergenekon members intentionally gave false warnings to Russia's FSB security service linking followers of Said Nursi and his disciple Fethullah Gülen with religious extremism.

"And this has harmed not just Tatarstan, but the whole of Russia," the headteacher of Tatar-Turkish Lycee No 4 suggested to Forum 18 on 23 June.

While Gülen's modernist Islamic movement is known for its network of faith-based schools in Turkey and elsewhere, Tatarstan's seven Tatar-Turkish lycees – state secondary schools with an emphasis on Tatar, Turkish and English – are secular and unconnected with Gülen, Fattiyev insists. They were founded in the early 1990s when then Turkish President Turgut Özal and Tatar President Mintimer Shaimiyev agreed on a programme of cultural and economic co-operation; Turks and Tatars share close ethnic and linguistic ties. Despite this, the lycees' approximately 50 Turkish teachers were refused visa extensions in 2008 following a religious extremism investigation (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136).

The absurdity of the allegations is clear, Fattiyev suggested to Forum 18, from his own 2006 interrogation by Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office and regional FSB, during which he was likewise accused of membership of "Nurdzhular" (a russification of "Nurcular", Turkish for "Nursi followers").

"Then – and to this day – I didn't know whether such an organisation even exists," the lycee headteacher remarked. After asking how and when he had become a member, the state representatives posed "provocative questions" such as whether he loved his family and was ready to die for Allah, he added. "After that I became interested in what I was supposed to be accused of," Fattiyev commented. Whereas his interrogators claimed Nursi works are banned in Turkey, Fattiyev found them freely available during a visit and read

them while in Turkey. "I was pleasantly surprised at how Nursi is comprehensible, contemporary, tolerant," he told Forum 18. "I never found anything extremist there."

Fattiyev also pointed out that the daughters of local Muslim leaders and FSB officers continue to attend his lycee – hardly likely if the allegations bore any foundation. Russians in Tatarstan who have studied Nursi's writing have insisted that no organised Nursi movement exists, let alone a "Nurdzhular sect" (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=991).

Tatar officials question federal claims

Renat Valiullin, head of Tatarstan's Council for Religious Affairs, told Forum 18 on 22 June that to his knowledge there had been no religious activity at the lycees (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136). Describing the situation as "our sore point", he claimed that extensive tuition in English – rather than the state languages of Russian and Tatar – had led to the Turkish teachers' removal. Valiullin went on to express doubt about the inclusion of Nursi literature on the Federal List of Extremist Materials: "The decision was made without any strong expert analysis (..) on the basis of linguistic or other examinations (..) professionals weren't working on it."

The Justice Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis has been reconstituted in part to re-evaluate the inclusion of religious titles on the Federal List, he maintained (see F18News 26 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1299).

Irek Arslanov, responsible for relations with religious organisations at Kazan City Government, similarly defended the lycees' educational standards. He suggested there was "a certain air of invention" about claims that the Turkish teachers' documentation had been incomplete. "We can't speak about extremism, because it was not proven by the courts," he stressed to Forum 18 on 24 June. While the lycees' education might be based on Islamic values, he added, it did not go "beyond common human principles; what is found in mosques, churches."

Federal moves against Nursi followers

Federal officials take a quite different view. The discovery of "a network of the Turkish extremist group Nurdzhular" teaching in Tatarstan's state schools for more than a decade was announced at a 28 May meeting of the parliamentary Security Committee by Vyacheslav Sizov, responsible at the General Public Prosecutor's Office for monitoring implementation of laws on federal security, international relations and extremism, Russian media reported. Since the Tatar authorities had failed to take measures, the Turkish teachers were forced to leave Russia only thanks to intervention by the General Prosecutor, Sizov maintained.

The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), consisting of Russia and six other ex-Soviet republics, added "Nurdzhular" - as well as Tabligh and Salafism - to its list of terrorist and extremist organisations this May (see F18News 15 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1297).

Russia's Supreme Court banned "the international religious organisation Nurdzhular" as extremist on 10 April 2008. Moscow's Koptevo District Court similarly outlawed the Russian translations of fourteen parts of Risale-i Nur (Messages of Light), Nursi's commentary on the Koran and Islam more broadly, on 21 May 2007 (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981). Automatically added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials, these are now banned throughout Russia.

Russia's Ombudsman for Human Rights denounced the Moscow trial even before its verdict. "No form of opposition to citizens due to their choice of world view (religious or non-religious) is contained in the books and brochures, still less calls for religious hatred and intolerance," Vladimir Lukin declared. "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, as this really could provoke wide-scale violations of their right to freedom of belief."

Ravil Gainutdin, who chairs the Council of Muftis, described the ban in an open letter as "a crude violation of freedom of conscience in our country" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

In the wake of the ban, Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office representatives twice sought Nursi literature at Lycee No 4 in 2007, even photocopying pages from English-language science textbooks. In the context of a religious extremism case opened "due to the activity of the religious-nationalist sect Nurdzhular", the Office warned the lycee on 11 April 2008 that its Turkish teachers were holding "secret discussions about religion" with pupils. Soon afterwards, a Public Prosecutor's Office representative denied to Forum 18 that the check-ups and warning were connected with the Nursi case (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136).

Both before and after the Moscow ban, law enforcement agencies conducted raids on the homes of Nursi readers across Russia (see F18News 13 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1061).

A particular target was a Nursi study group of about 50 Muslim women in Naberezhnyye Chelny (Tatarstan), who were subject to forced psychiatric examinations (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=992). The women insist they are not part of any organised Nursi movement (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=991).

While they first reported harassment in 2005, member Alsu Khusayenova told Forum 18 from Naberezhnyye Chelny on 20 June that the group has not been disturbed in recent months.

Hunt for Nursi literature continues

In other regions, however, state representatives continue to hunt for Nursi literature and readers. On 4 June Krasnoyarsk Regional Court began consideration of whether a further part of Risale-i Nur – seized during a house search in the city – is extremist, Russian Islamic affairs website Islam.ru reported. Among evidence proposed by the regional Public Prosecutor's Office: "the core values of the given text are postulates suggested by Islam, which, according to the text, are the truth," "the idea of a single God and a single Prophet is suggested," and the presence in the text of "militaristic metaphors". The court reportedly rejected defence testimony from Sheikh Nafigulla Ashirov, who heads the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Asiatic Russia, as coming from an "interested party".

Siberian customs officers seized 350 copies of Nursi's works from a car belonging to a Kyrgyz citizen, Interfax Russian news agency reported on 15 May.

On 21 April representatives of the FSB and Lenin District Public Prosecutor's Office in Ufa (Bashkortostan) seized a banned Nursi work from the Central Spiritual Muslim Directorate's Russian Islamic University library, Interfax reported.

Recalling the ban on "Nurdzhular" on 13 April, General Public Prosecutor Yuri Chaika remarked: "We are particularly concerned by attempts by certain foreign centres to penetrate radical religious trends into Russia, which in future become a weapon in the hands of extremist organisations," according to Interfax.

The inclusion of two banned Nursi works on a list of Islamic literature approved by the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of European Russia is "an open challenge which could be seen as spitting in the face of the Russian authorities," Mufti Mukhammedgali Khuzin, a member of the Justice Ministry's working group on civil rights law, told Interfax on 9 April.

On 3 March, FSB and Organised Crime Police in Orenburg raided flats of university students suspected of activity in "Nurdzhular", Islam.ru reported. All their religious literature – including the Koran – was seized without explanation, and the students were detained and questioned for nine hours. "We were in shock, treated like criminals – taken to the Organised Crime Police building and made to stand facing a wall for several hours," remarked Ramil Latypov, one of the detained. The students also reported that Nursi brochures and a leaflet called "How to Join the Nurdzhular Organisation" appeared "miraculously" in their flats during the raid.

Russian Muslim sources have told Forum 18 that the situation surrounding Nursi's works has led their principal translator into Russian, Marat Tamimdarov, to flee the country. Tamimdarov's home in Naberezhnyye Chelny was raided by FSB and Public Prosecutor's Office representatives in December 2007 (see F18News 13 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1061).

From a Sufi family, Turkish theologian Said Nursi (1876-1960) attempted to integrate Islamic and modern scientific thought. Known particularly for his biting opposition to the social consequences of atheist ideology, he once wrote to the Vatican suggesting that Muslims and Christians should join forces against it. Inevitably at odds with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's rigidly secularist regime, Nursi spent many years in internal exile and prison. (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=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).

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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

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