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RUSSIA: Muslims raided, more Jehovah's Witness literature banned

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

Following an 11 December raid on a Makhachkala flat by "a whole busload" of armed and masked rapid reaction police led by a Dagestani FSB security service investigator, some 30 readers of the works of the late Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi were taken for questioning. Six homes of other Nursi readers in Dagestan were raided. Ziyavdin Dapayev, one of two of those held who could face criminal charges of participating in a banned religious extremist organisation, lamented to Forum 18 News Service that Nursi readers are becoming "victims to the incompetence of some employees of the law enforcement agencies". Dagestan FSB told Forum 18 no one could answer questions about the investigation. Nursi's works have been banned in Russia, despite a 2007 Turkish government statement that they "contain no statements whatsoever aimed at inciting religious hatred". Moscow Public Prosecutor's Office confirmed to Forum 18 that it had issued an extremism warning to Ravil Gainutdin, chair of the Russia-wide Council of Muftis, for inviting a Turkish Nursi follower to a Moscow conference. Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses have lost their latest appeal against an extremism ban on more of their publications.

Two readers of the late Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi could face religious extremism charges following mid-December 2009 raids in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Local law-enforcement personnel "say there will definitely be a court case", Ziyavdin Dapayev, one of those under criminal investigation, told Forum 18 from the Dagestani capital Makhachkala on 23 January. In a separate religious extremism case in the Siberian republic of Altai, a ban on 18 items of Jehovah's Witness literature was upheld on 27 January.

The Dagestan raids came as the state moves against even a top Muslim leader for inviting a prominent Turkish Nursi follower to a September 2009 Moscow conference. Issued an extremism warning by the city's public prosecutors in mid-January 2010, Ravil Gainutdin chairs the Russia-wide Council of Muftis and the Muslim Board of European Russia. He joined President Dmitry Medvedev on the presidium of a meeting of the presidential Committee for Relations with Religious Associations in March 2009.

Defenders of state action against followers of Nursi's approach to Islam, such as Roman Silantsev, a vice-chair of the Justice Ministry's recently formed Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis, routinely claim that they form an organisation banned for extremism in Turkey, "Nurdzhular". Official Turkish government documents recently viewed by Forum 18, however, state categorically that Nursi's works are not harmful in any way whatsoever and are freely available in Turkey.

The Expert Council has been the focus of widespread protests by Russian religious communities and human rights defenders (see F18News 2 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1303).

Armed police raid in Dagestan

According to Nursi reader Ziyavdin Dapayev, "a whole busload" of armed and masked rapid reaction police led by a senior investigator with the Dagestani FSB security service, Abdulla Abdullayev, broke up a gathering of some 30 Nursi readers at his Makhachkala home at 8pm on 11 December. Having burst in in dirty shoes, the law-enforcement personnel struck residents and guests while forcibly removing them barefoot into the cold communal stairway. They then confiscated some 1,200 of Dapayev's books and brochures, including many in Arabic, English and Turkish. Dapayev stressed to Forum 18 that the literature at his home was not extremist and did not include the Russian translations of Nursi's "Risale-i Nur" collection, controversially banned by a Moscow court in May 2007.

Dapayev, his flatmate Ruslan Bulatov and their guests were subsequently detained for over eight hours at Makhachkala FSB headquarters. There they were told to make statements admitting membership of Nurdzhular, banned by Russia's Supreme Court in April 2008. They insist that they do not know or belong to any such organisation, however: "We just read Nursi's books to strengthen our faith (...) People who read 'Risale-i Nur' [Messages of Light] are not some kind of organisation, trend, still less a political party, but ordinary Muslims (...) The only thing linking his readers is the same love and brotherhood as between all believers."

According to Dapayev, the group was threatened with extended detention unless they confessed; students also with expulsion from college and parents with harm to their children. Criminal cases were then opened against Dapayev and Bulatov under Article 282.2, Part 2 of the Criminal Code (participation in a banned religious extremist organisation), carrying a maximum two-year prison sentence.

Simultaneous raids were conducted at the Makhachkala homes of Gaidar Gadzhiev, Shakhveled Muradaliyev, Saifudin Sereda and Timur Khaibulayev, as well as on Nursi readers in the Dagestani towns of Izberbash and Derbent, Dapayev told Forum 18.

"Freedom of religion and conscience is the cornerstone.."

"Freedom of religion and conscience is the cornerstone of our civilised society and their defence should be a part of any lawful state action," Dapayev maintained to Forum 18. Instead, while "ordinary citizens exercising our basic constitutional rights," Nursi readers are becoming "victims to the incompetence of some employees of the law enforcement agencies," he maintains.

He insists that Nursi, likened to Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy, supported "peaceful coexistence of all peoples" and that his readers can bring only benefit to society: "They say, 'but maybe you will commit some kind of crime, how do we know?' In that case, one can presume that, carrying weapons, the rapid reaction police, FSB and other law-enforcement agencies might open fire against innocent people. If that is probable, then their weaponry should be confiscated and a criminal case opened against each of them. Why does the 'law of probability' apply only to ordinary Muslims?"

Official defence of raids

Contacted repeatedly on 28 January, a spokesperson at the press service of Dagestan FSB said there was no one present who could answer Forum 18's questions. In a comment published by the independent Dagestani newspaper Chernovik on 25 December, the republic's FSB did confirm simultaneous "investigatory actions" in several towns on 11 December, involving the detention of some 40 people and discovery of a large quantity of banned literature. They were part of a criminal case on extremism opened on 16 November 2009, the FSB explained, on the basis of the May 2007 and April 2008 court bans on "Risale-i Nur" and Nurdzhular.

After the raids, a 3,000-word 24 December report by RIA Novosti Dagestan warned that "conspiratorial cells" of Nursi readers – equated with Nurdzhular – meet in "conspiratorial flats" in the republic. Nursi followers aim to unite all Turkic peoples around Turkey in a "Turkic empire", the news agency claims – and are thus supported by the intelligence agencies of Turkey and the USA, "whose aims are to weaken and then completely destroy Russia". In what is now a routine argument of Nursi critics in Russia, however, the report also argues that the theologian's works "are banned in most countries of the world" - including Turkey, where the "Nurdzhular sect" is also allegedly banned "and attempts to spread it are very strictly punished."

Turkish defence of Nursi's works

Official Turkish state documents recently viewed by Forum 18 undermine this claim. Responding to similar 1950s allegations that Nursi – then living - and his followers were "violating state security using religious spirituality and organisation of a society called Nurdzhular", Afyon City Court in western Turkey ruled on 23 June 1956 that books confiscated from them "do not pose a threat to the content of the laws or political and administrative security of the country" and should be returned.

A similar 17 October 1960 ruling specifically notes that the books of the "Risale-i Nur" collection "were published with state permission and are permitted to be freely bought and sold". This ruling also notes that "not a scrap of evidence was found to suggest that the defendants were gathering in pursuit of anything other than religious aims, or organised any form of society by the name of Nurdzhular (...) it was [therefore] ascertained that the only thing linking these people labelled Nurdzhular is spiritual unity as a result of reading the same books."

A 30 March 2007 statement signed by Mehmet Görmez, vice-chair of Turkey's governmental Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyaret Isleri Baskanligi) likewise finds that the 14 books of "Risale-i Nur" "contain no statements whatsoever aimed at inciting religious hatred, belittling individual people or groups of people adhering to different religious views or giving rise to hostile feelings in relation to them, belittling national feelings and traditions, encouraging the exclusivity of separate people by exploiting their religious and national views, defending extremism and radical actions or calling for recognition of the exclusivity of individual groups on the basis of political and ethnic differences." He therefore concludes that the works "do not pose any harm whatsoever from a religious and social point of view".

Extremism warning to senior mufti

Nevertheless, on 18 January Aleksei Grigoryev, Moscow's assistant public prosecutor, issued an extremism warning to top mufti Ravil Gainutdin due to the invitation of prominent Nursi follower Mustafa Sungur to a Moscow conference on "Russia and the Islamic World: Partnership in the Name of Stability" held on 24 September 2009, Interfax reported. Published on the news agency's website, the text of the warning alleges that Sungur belongs to Nurdzhular, whose followers aim "to spread ideas of fundamentalist Islam with elements of intolerance towards non-believers" and attract "people with unsuccessful personal lives and minors using

methods of suggestion harmful to citizens' health and brutal psychological oppression".

While acknowledging the presence of the text of the warning on the internet, a spokesperson at Mufti Ravil Gainutdin's office told Forum 18 on 28 January that they had not received any official document and so could not comment. Also on 28 January, the press service of Moscow Public Prosecutor's Office confirmed to Forum 18 that it had issued an extremism warning to Gainutdin. In a 22 January statement to the Muslim affairs website Islam.ru, Damir Gizatullin, his assistant at the Muslim Board of European Russia, admitted that Sungur's invitation had been a "mistake by the conference's organising committee", which, he stressed, had included representatives of organisations other than the Council of Muftis. A 22 January commentary on Islam.ru pointed out, however, that if Russia regards Sungur as persona non grata, it was the responsibility of the Foreign Ministry not to issue him a visa.

Translations of Nursi's works banned in Russia

Added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials after being outlawed by Moscow's Koptevo District Court on 21 May 2007, the Russian translations of "Risale-i Nur" are now banned throughout Russia. Under the Extremism Law, mass distribution, preparation or storage with the aim of mass distribution of the titles can result in Criminal Code Article 282 ("incitement of ethnic, racial or religious hatred") being invoked. This carries a penalty of up to five years in prison.

Even before the 2007 verdict, Russia's Ombudsman for Human Rights denounced the trial: "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." At the time, Ravil Gainutdin described the ban 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).

Koptevo District Court met in closed session and its seven-page ruling did not cite any evidence for the psychologists' and linguists' conclusions on which the ban rests, such as that Nursi's work "propagandises hatred between Muslims and non-believers". Among the strongest evidence against "Risale-i Nur" found by psychologists and psychiatrists in their 2006 analysis for a similar case opened in Tatarstan was that Nursi's reference to a prophecy about Jesus' Second Coming as the fulfilment of sharia law "discredits the religious value of Christianity as a religion" and that his reference to "the sword of strong faith" was "a concept of opposition and war which could lead to defensive behaviour" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

Intermittent state action against Nursi readers occurred in Tatarstan and elsewhere in Russia both before and after the bans on "Risale-i Nur" and Nurdzhular. Latterly, prominent officials in Tatarstan have expressed doubt about such action to Forum 18, especially after some 50 Turkish teachers in the republic were refused visa extensions to work in secular Tatar-Turkish lycees with a high reputation among the local government elite (see F18News 16 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1328).

Jehovah's Witnesses fail to overturn extremism ruling

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court of Altai Republic in southern Siberia on 27 January upheld an earlier ruling by the city court in the capital, Gorno-Altaysk, outlawing 18 items of Jehovah's Witness literature as extremist. This means that the ban now enters legal force.

While no further possibility for a direct appeal exists, the Jehovah's Witnesses are currently considering lodging a supervisory complaint with the Supreme Court in Moscow, their spokesperson Grigory Martynov told Forum 18 on 28 January. One of the titles outlawed - albeit in a different edition - was among the 34 already banned by an 11 September 2009 decision of Rostov-on-Don Regional Court, upheld by Russia's Supreme Court on 8 December (see F18News 8 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1385).

While those titles have yet to be added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials, Jehovah's Witnesses have received detentions and official warnings in various regions in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling (see F18News 15 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1395). (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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