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RUSSIA: "A plan of organisational and operational search measures"

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Russian state officials have repeatedly refused to explain why and by whom moves against Jehovah's Witnesses and readers of the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi were initiated. Forum 18 News Service notes that internal government documents, from a wide geographic spread of regions, reveal that the campaign is co-ordinated at a high level. Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Nursi readers have been targeted in ways that suggest that their believers and communities are closely watched by the police and FSB security service – both within and outside their communities. One police document cites "a plan of organisational and operational search measures to expose, warn and stop the illegal activity of representatives of the religious organisation the Jehovah's Witnesses". Another document refers to an Interior Ministry directive "with the aims of securing law and order, anti-terrorist protection and security at especially important and government sites, and aggression in countering the intrusion of xenophobia, and racial and religious extremism". A further document reveals that police shared "operational information" about a named Jehovah's Witness with a Russian Orthodox Church diocese. Private employers and public libraries have also been ordered to co-operate in the campaign.

With the repeated refusal by Russian state officials to explain why and by whom moves against Jehovah's Witnesses and readers of the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi were initiated, members of those communities can only guess their motivation. The broad range of agencies involved – including courts, the police, the FSB security service, and prosecutor's offices - is clear from official statements and court judgments. An examination by Forum 18 News Service of internal government documents concerning the Jehovah's Witnesses, however, reveals that the campaign against them is co-ordinated at a high level - and relies on Soviet-style intrusive surveillance.

One document from the southern resort of Sochi points to close FSB scrutiny of the Jehovah's Witnesses' Russian headquarters far to the north in St Petersburg. It also indicates that the state knew of Jehovah's Witness plans for a public protest before they were revealed to anyone outside the religious community. Other documents show that the security agencies collect extensive information about individual Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as their group activity. By routinely referring to the Jehovah's Witnesses as a "destructive religious organisation" or "religious organisation of extremist orientation" even though they are legally registered in Russia, the documents also support the Jehovah's Witnesses' view that the authorities want a complete ban on their organisation, not just its religious literature.

Adding a new twist to Soviet-style tactics, one document also reveals that police shared "operational information" about a named Jehovah's Witness with a Russian Orthodox Church diocese, and sought two dioceses' views on Jehovah's Witness beliefs and practices.

The campaign

Jehovah's Witnesses have long suspected that the ongoing action against them is co-ordinated from above rather than independent initiatives by local officials (see F18News 25 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1426).

In the space of three weeks in spring 2009, prosecutor's offices conducted more than 500 visits and other checks on Jehovah's Witness communities across Russia, looking for errors in their statutes, records of decisions, registration and property documents, as well as checking whether their activity was in accordance with their statutes. Later that year, prosecutors in various parts of Russia initiated court cases to ban specific Jehovah's Witness literature as "extremist".

This led to the key December 2009 Supreme Court ruling, upholding an earlier decision by Rostov-on-Don Regional Court outlawing 34 Jehovah's Witness titles as extremist and dissolving the local Jehovah's Witness religious organisation in Taganrog (see F18News 8 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1385).

Since that decision, Jehovah's Witnesses who spread their faith on the street or door to door have faced increased police interrogations, threats and fines (see F18News 26 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1469).

Forum 18 has repeatedly asked the Interior Ministry, the FSB security service, the General Prosecutor's Office and other state agencies why the campaign was launched. Officials refuse or fail to comment, refer Forum 18 to other state agencies or to court judgments, or deny that any centralised state campaign is underway.

For example, Forum 18 has received no response to written questions sent on 8 June to Sergei Ignatchenko, spokesperson for the FSB in Moscow, as to why the campaign was launched, what role the FSB played in it, and what danger to the Russian Federation the FSB sees in Jehovah's Witness activity.

FSB surveillance

The extent of FSB surveillance of the Russian Jehovah's Witness headquarters in St Petersburg and a close interest in their plans for a public protest against state harassment is revealed in an order from Sochi (Krasnodar Region) in Russia's far south.

In the undated order, apparently issued in late February 2010, Colonel Andrei Polyakov, Deputy Head of the Sochi Transport Police within the Interior Ministry, informed 14 different Transport Police offices in and around the Black Sea port of Sochi about a "complex of measures" – unspecified – being taken by Krasnodar Regional FSB "to halt the illegal activity of functionaries of the destructive religious organisation, the Jehovah's Witnesses", received by his agency on 25 February.

The FSB information detailed the various court cases ruling items of Jehovah's Witness literature extremist. As a result, it said, the Jehovah's Witness headquarters in St Petersburg had "unleashed wide-scale propaganda" among Jehovah's Witnesses about the "repressions" which they were suffering. The order also maintains that "data in hand testify to heightened conspiratorial measures by Jehovahists [a Soviet-era pejorative term]" to hold meetings, congresses and build Kingdom Halls – all entirely legal activity, Forum 18 notes.

The FSB added that the Jehovah's Witness headquarters had instructed followers to remove literature, documents, membership lists and computers from Kingdom Halls, and "recommended that literature be distributed among adepts' homes." The order also claimed that Jehovah's Witnesses were trying to re-register communally owned property in the names of loyal individuals.

Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Grigory Martynov has since confirmed to Forum 18 that Jehovah's Witness organisations have stopped using those titles outlawed as extremist at Kingdom Halls in an effort to comply with the ban. Russian law regards mass distribution and storage for mass distribution of banned titles as offences, at least formally allowing individuals to possess personal copies.

The FSB information also said that it knew of plans – drawn up in collaboration with the Jehovah's Witness headquarters in New York – for Russian Jehovah's Witnesses to undertake a nationwide information campaign from 26-28 February 2010 "to draw public attention to the 'persecutions' of the organisation on the part of the Russian authorities". It said they intended to distribute a leaflet named: "Is history repeating itself questions to Russians" - correctly titled, but without punctuation. The FSB also quoted what it said were lines of arguments Jehovah's Witnesses would use in presenting the public with the leaflet, including "More than 300,000 Russians share JW beliefs", and "JWs have existed in Russia for more than 100 years" (see F18News 26 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1415).

"Conspiratorial measures"

"Heightened conspiratorial measures" were claimed by the FSB to surround preparation for the campaign, with ordinary Jehovah's Witnesses to be told of it only on the day it was to be launched.

In order to minimise state disruption to the campaign, ordinary Jehovah's Witnesses were indeed told of its precise nature only on 26 February, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Grigory Martynov confirmed to Forum 18 on 10 August.

The FSB also cited information that Jehovah's Witness congresses planned to begin on 1 March and would study the book "Come Follow Me". It pointed out that this book was ruled extremist by the December 2009 Supreme Court verdict, and accused the Jehovah's Witnesses of trying to pressure the Russian authorities and present them in a bad light.

"Illegal activity" by Jehovah's Witnesses – such as "organising and conducting any illegal protests or distribution of extremist literature" - was ordered to be reported immediately to the FSB.

Transport Police Colonel Polyakov ordered the 14 Transport Police offices to notify the Regional FSB, as well as his agency, of any such actions.

The Sochi Transport Police order did not reveal how the FSB knew of Jehovah's Witness plans for a public campaign before it had begun, or the title of the leaflet that they were preparing to publish before it had become publicly available. That the title was given with no punctuation may indicate that the FSB heard rather than saw it.

Close scrutiny

Two other documents from the ordinary police, like the Transport Police part of the Interior Ministry, reveal the extent of information gathering about individual Jehovah's Witnesses and their community activity.

In an instruction that appears to have been typed on 9 October 2009 but not sent until 9 March 2010, Aleksandr Shtobbe, head of police for the Closed [due to a naval base] Administrative Zone of Fokino in the far eastern Primorye Region, wrote to the head of Teploenergo, the local heating company, calling for tighter security measures. He was ordered to check the "religious views" of job applicants thoroughly and to "take a decision" on members of "religious organisations of extremist orientation", without violating their rights. "Conduct a check-up of employees and staff for membership of the religious organisation of extremist orientation, the Jehovah's Witnesses," instruct three of the orders. "On learning of this given category of persons, pay particular attention to information coming from them to the collective."

Shtobbe also explains that his instruction is being issued in response to a directive from the Interior Ministry "with the aims of securing law and order, anti-terrorist protection and security at especially important and government sites, and aggression in countering the intrusion of xenophobia, and racial and religious extremism".

Following the instruction, Yury Baikin and Olga Cherevko, two of four Jehovah's Witnesses who work at Teploenergo, were asked by their work supervisor to sign a document about terrorism. The pair refused, saying they had nothing to do with either extremism or terrorism.

"A plan of organisational and operational search measures"

In south-western Siberia, a 17 March 2010 Kemerovo Regional Police circular to all local police chiefs, signed by Deputy Police Chief Aleksei Kozhevin, orders subordinates to find out personal details and other information on Jehovah's Witnesses. The circular, which Forum 18 has seen, cites "a plan of organisational and operational search measures to expose, warn and stop the illegal activity of representatives of the religious organisation the Jehovah's Witnesses". The plan had been approved on 5 February by the head of Kemerovo Regional Police, Lieutenant General Aleksandr Elin, and on 10 February by Major General Vladimir Panov.

As part of the plan, local police for every district were ordered to undertake "a survey of citizens by courtyard and flat" to establish what Jehovah's Witness individuals or groups are active.

Information was to be collected on where Jehovah's Witnesses hold meetings, whether registered or "illegally functioning" communities distribute literature, "leaders, elders and adepts (parishioners)", listing names and full details, including telephone numbers and publications they distribute, with copies wherever possible.

The information was to be supplied by 19 March, within two days of the order, to the Regional Police Department for the Organisation of the Activity of Local Police, and to the Subdivision for the Affairs of Minors within the Public Order Police. Local police chiefs were ordered to present this information every three months.

"Jehovah's Witnesses are sort of extremist"

When Forum 18 called the number given on the instruction for reporting information on 8 June, the woman who answered the phone said it was the Department for Crime Prevention. She said she had heard of the February decrees approving the plan but had not seen them. She referred all enquiries to the Police's Counterextremism Centre "as the Jehovah's Witnesses are sort of extremist". Reached the same day, however, the Centre referred Forum 18 to the Public Order Police, where an official who would not give his name refused to say how many offices had submitted information on Jehovah's Witnesses in their area and what the Police had done with this information.

Reached on 10 June, the duty officer at Kemerovo Regional FSB security service consulted inaudibly with colleagues for some time when Forum 18 asked why it had drawn up a plan to take measures against a religious community which is not illegal. "Where did you get this document?" the officer – who would not give his name – then asked. He said no information could be given by phone, but denied that his organisation was closed to scrutiny. "We are open," he claimed, before putting the phone down.

Such close surveillance of individual Jehovah's Witnesses and communities may account for how traffic police were, for example, able to identify three minibuses of Jehovah's Witnesses to be stopped and searched on the border of Krasnodar and Stavropol Regions on 9 July. If such information gathering also extends to readers of the works of Said Nursi, it may account for how police were able to target a reader on 22 June as he got out of a train at Novosibirsk station (see F18News 27 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1470).

Officials seek Orthodox Church's help

Despite the constitutional separation of the state from religious organisations, police have on occasion sought the views of local Russian Orthodox dioceses about the Jehovah's Witnesses' beliefs and activity, documents seen by Forum 18 reveal.

On 26 August 2009, Police Colonel Vladimir Shkaev, Head of Kamyshlov Police in Sverdlovsk Region, on the Asian side of the Ural Mountains, wrote to the local diocesan Russian Orthodox Archbishop Dimitry (Kapalin) of Tobolsk and Tyumen, informing him that ten days earlier "operational information" about an "initial verification" had come in about a named local Jehovah's Witness. Colonel Shkaev asked the archbishop's blessing for the diocesan Missionary Department to provide information about the "existence within your diocese of sects of a totalitarian orientation". Of "particular interest" was information about the "possible involvement" of the named Jehovah's Witness in "destructive activity directed against the Orthodox Church on the territory of your diocese".

At the request of the regional police Counterextremism Department, the Russian Orthodox diocese of Kemerovo and Novokuznetsk, in south-western Siberia, produced an assessment of the statutes of the local Jehovah's Witness religious organisation in the city of Kemerovo. Its mostly theological analysis was produced under the diocese's February 2007 co-operation agreement with Kemerovo regional administration. Posted on the website of prominent anti-cultist Aleksandr Dvorkin's St Irenaeus of Lyons Informational Consultation Centre on 24 May 2010, the nine-page assessment refutes the Jehovah's Witnesses' self-identification as Christians, and states that the Jehovah's Witness interpretation of Scripture is "very far not only from traditional interpretations, but also from the laws of logic". As the Jehovah's Witnesses' main aim is to promote and increase circulation of their literature, it claims in conclusion, the entire organisation is not religious at all, but "bears all the hallmarks of a commercial cult".

So far there has been no sign that either of these state moves to co-opt the opposition of the Russian Orthodox Church has had any impact on local Jehovah's Witnesses, Grigory Martynov of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 10 August.

Library books controlled

As many Jehovah's Witness titles were banned and entered onto the Federal List of Extremist Materials, various state agencies moved to limit public access to them. Under a 29 March 2010 instruction to public libraries issued by Vladimir Zaitsev, general director of the Russian National Library, library holdings which feature on the Federal List are to be marked with a special symbol – an exclamation mark within a circle – to indicate that access to them is restricted. While such titles may still be stored in libraries, they may not be copied or exhibited, and are to be read within designated reading rooms.

Also according to the instruction, persons wishing to read a library holding on the Federal List must first fill out a form requesting the publication and confirming that they have been warned that it is on the List and not subject to mass distribution.

Russia's supervisory body for information technology and mass communications, Roskomnadzor, announced on 30 April that it has annulled permission to import "The Watchtower" and "Awake!" publications (see F18News 27 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1470). (END)

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).

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, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

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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