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RUSSIA: Criminal charges to follow armed Tatarstan raids?

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

Armed and masked Russian law enforcement agents raided 23 homes of readers of Islamic theologian Said Nursi in Tatarstan, in the early hours of 14 February, Forum 18 News Service has learned. "They took everything," one of those searched, Laura Khapinova, told Forum 18. "Anything where they saw the word 'Islam'." Two of those raided are under arrest on criminal charges of "extremism". Ilnur Khafizov is in police detention and Nakiya Sharifullina under house arrest, Khapinova told Forum 18. A uniformed investigator showed Khapinova and her flatmate a search warrant "for banned literature, drugs and weapons". One question put by interrogators was "Do you read or distribute extremist literature?", she told Forum 18. "They don't like the fact that guests come to our home to pray and read the Koran and other literature," Khapinova remarked. Tatarstan's Interior Ministry was unable to tell Forum 18 what was concretely "extremist" about the activity of those searched.

Armed and masked Russian law enforcement agents raided 23 homes of readers of Islamic theologian Said Nursi in Naberezhnyye Chelny, a city in the traditionally Muslim republic of Tatarstan, in the early hours of 14 February, Forum 18 News Service has learned.

"They took everything," one of those searched, Laura Khapinova, told Forum 18 from Naberezhnyye Chelny on 15 February. "Anything where they saw the word 'Islam'."

Two of those raided are under arrest on criminal charges of "extremism". Ilnur Khafizov is in police detention and Nakiya Sharifullina under house arrest, Khapinova told Forum 18 (see below).

Stepped up campaign

From a Turkish Sufi background, Said Nursi (1876-1960) attempted to integrate Islamic and modern scientific thought. Known for 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. While Nursi spent many years in internal exile and prison under the rigidly secularist regime of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, his works are now freely read in Turkey.

In Russia, however, some regional law enforcement agents are stepping up their campaign against Nursi readers. Courts have ruled 18 Nursi works "extremist" in recent months, and a criminal "extremism" trial against two Nursi readers continues in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk (see F18News 27 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1807).

Human rights defenders – including Russia's Ombudsperson for Human Rights – and leading Muslims are strongly critical of the state's moves against Nursi readers (see F18News 5 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1811).

Large-scale raids

Armed and masked police burst into the home of Nursi reader Laura Khapinova soon after 6 am on 14 February, she told Forum 18. Some 20 ordinary police, OMON special police and FSB security service officers searched her flat for the next six hours, she estimated. "They came all day as if on an excursion - there were men coming in just to have a look."

A uniformed investigator showed Khapinova and her flatmate a search warrant "for banned literature, drugs and weapons". However, they were not given a copy of this or a list of items confiscated, including mobile phones, computers, passports and religious literature, she told Forum 18.

Some victims of the simultaneous raids even had copies of the Koran seized, Khapinova complained. Children who had been using computers confiscated in the raids are now unable to study, she added.

Nursi readers in Naberezhnyye Chelny were among the first to be targeted by the Russian authorities. From mid-2005, the women's group was subjected to raids, book confiscations, forced psychiatric evaluations and an attempt to launch a criminal prosecution, but this never came to trial (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=992).

"Conspiratorial madrassahs"?

In the latest raids, Tatarstan's ordinary and counter-extremism police and FSB security service searched 23 addresses, including two "illegal conspiratorial madrassahs" of "members of the banned organisation 'Nurdzhular'", a 15 February press release on the website of the republic's Interior Ministry states.

Russia's Supreme Court banned "the international religious organisation Nurdzhular" as "extremist" in April 2008. Nursi readers deny they form part of any such organisation (see Forum 18's Russia "Extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724).

Maksim Kostromin of the Ministry's Press Service was unable to tell Forum 18 on 19 February what was concretely "extremist" about the activity of those searched. When Forum 18 asked why the press release identified them as members rather than suspected members, Kostromin presumed there must be good reason for doing so. "They wouldn't conduct searches just like that."

The press release reported that "extremist literature" at the 23 addresses included over 1,000 books by Said Nursi in Turkish, Tatar and Russian. Accompanying film of one of the searches further attempted to demonstrate that criminal activity had been uncovered. A lengthy close-up showed two seized Nursi texts - "Twenty-Second Word" and "Letters". However, neither of these is a banned title on Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials.

People who possess items on the Federal List of Extremist Materials are liable to criminal prosecution (see Forum 18's Russia "Extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724).

Asked how Turkish and Tatar texts could be termed "extremist literature" when all the Nursi texts ruled "extremist" by Russian courts are Russian translations, Kostromin stressed that information on Tatarstan Interior Ministry's website was official and correct.

As well as Russian translations, the 24 banned Nursi works on the Federal List as of 19 February 2013 are particular editions, but law enforcement agents are increasingly failing to distinguish between editions and even titles (see F18News 5 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1811).

Tatarstan Interior Ministry's 15 February press release also states that over One million Roubles (185,000 Norwegian Kroner, 25,000 Euros or 35,000 US Dollars) was seized during the previous morning's searches. The accompanying film featured demonstrative counting of three separate bundles of US Dollars and Russian Roubles, each appearing approximately equivalent to 1,500 US Dollars. One bundle was taken from a passport also containing loose passport photographs.

This was money and documentation collected from Nursi readers – including pensioners – for the autumn 2013 haj pilgrimage to Mecca, Laura Khapinova explained to Forum 18. "Tourist firms are already dealing with bookings, and we were just about to hand in people's money and documents." While the officers who confiscated the money promised to return it, she added, "it'll be too late, and prices are rising. The damage is material as well as moral."

Kostromin of Tatarstan Interior Ministry's press service stressed to Forum 18 that everything taken – including money and computer equipment – would be held as criminal evidence unless investigators or a court decided it was no longer needed as part of the investigation. He could not say how long it would be held.

"They allowed us to pray, but nothing else"

Nursi reader Khapinova told Forum 18 that she and some 24 others were detained and questioned by police for a further six hours following the 14 February morning raids. "They allowed us to pray, but nothing else." Interrogators asked the same question repeatedly, she recalled: "Do you belong to the organisation 'Nurdzhular'?"

Russia's Supreme Court banned "Nurdzhular" (a russification of "Nurcular", Turkish for "Nursi followers") as "extremist" on 10 April 2008. The Court's reasoning has never been made public (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

"Everyone answered that there is no such organisation," Khapinova continued, "but they kept asking who the leader is, and confused the old women like that." Some of the Nursi readers who were searched and interrogated are women over 60, she told Forum 18.

Kostromin of Tatarstan Interior Ministry's press service was unable to tell Forum 18 whether a person's readership of works by Said Nursi automatically indicated membership of "Nurdzhular". "Investigators are dealing with that issue now and when they make public the charges a court will decide whether they are guilty or not," he replied.

Law enforcement agents routinely equate readership of Nursi's works with membership of "Nurdzhular". Yet Forum 18 has found no connection between the few reasons offered by Russian courts for banning Nursi literature and broader state allegations regarding

"Nurdzhular" (see F18News 5 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1811).

Detentions, criminal charges

Most of those detained and questioned in Naberezhnyye Chelny were released by evening on 14 February, Khapinova told Forum 18. Two, however - Nakiya Sharifullina and her husband's great-nephew, Ilnur Khafizov - stand accused of "organising the activity of an extremist organisation" (Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1). The harshest possible punishment for this offence is four years in prison.

Khafizov is to be held in police detention for two months, while Sharifullina has been placed under house arrest for an unknown period, Khapinova told Forum 18 on 17 February.

Kostromin of Tatarstan Interior Ministry's Press Service would not provide further details about those still detained. The Ministry's press release confirms the precise charges, detention and house arrest of "the organisers of the male and female cells of the extremist organisation", but does not identify them.

To date, five Nursi readers have received prison terms of up to 18 months as alleged members of "Nurdzhular"; five more have received suspended prison sentences (see F18News 6 June 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1709).

Jehovah's Witnesses are also a particular target of Russia's campaign against "extremism", and numerous Jehovah's Witness texts have been added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Despite continuing harassment and multiple prosecutions, however, law enforcement agents have yet to succeed in imprisoning a Jehovah's Witness for "extremism" (see F18News 2 January 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1786).

"Extremist" literature?

"Do you read or distribute extremist literature?" was another of the interrogators' questions on 14 February, Khapinova told Forum 18. "They don't like the fact that guests come to our home to pray and read the Koran and other literature," she remarked. "How can it be and what for? 'We don't get together to read Pushkin', they told us, stupid things like that."

Moscow's Koptevo District Court outlawed the Russian translations of 14 parts of Nursi's Koranic commentary "Risale-i Nur" ("Messages of Light") on 21 May 2007 (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

Two more Russian translations of parts of "Risale-i Nur" were added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials in January 2013.

Added at No. 1662 on 31 January was "Words", translated from Turkish by Ibrahim Salikh and published by Hizmet Vakfi Yayinlari in Istanbul in 2009. Moscow District Court in St Petersburg ruled the work "extremist" on 17 October 2012.

Added at No. 1639 on 18 January was "Fruits of Faith", translated from Turkish by Haziz Aliyev and published by Nesreden in Istanbul in 2011. Krasnoyarsk's Central District Court ruled the work "extremist" on 12 July 2012.

A different Russian translation of "Fruits of Faith" was added at No. 50 in late 2007. A district court in Omsk failed to secure an "extremism" conviction for distributing the same title in April 2005 (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

This was before the stipulation that the vague term "incitement of religious discord" had to be committed in connection with violence or the threat of violence was removed from the Extremism Law in July 2007, however. Prosecution has since become much easier (see F18News 23 July 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724).

Further Nursi titles were ruled "extremist" by local courts in early 2013, but the Justice Ministry has yet to add them to the Federal List. While the procedure is automatic, a delay of several months exists between a court decision determining material "extremist" and the work's addition to the List.

On 6 February Kaliningrad Regional Public Prosecutor's Office reported the ruling of 16 parts of Nursi's "Risale-i Nur" as "extremist" by Kaliningrad's Central District Court. The 16 titles include several already on the Federal List: "Tenth Word on the Resurrection of the Dead", "Words", "A Comparison of Belief and Unbelief", "Twenty-Third Word", "Way of the Sunna". It is unclear whether these are separate editions.

Volgograd's Central District Court ruled two unspecified foreign websites "extremist" on 22 January for featuring titles from "Risale-i Nur". According to Volgograd Region Public Prosecutor's Office, the decision treated disagreement with designations of "extremism" as in itself "extremist": among evidence against the websites included their "techniques forming the notion that the works of Nursi do not contain religious extremist ideas."

On 4 April 2011 the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg began consideration of the admissibility of a complaint (Application No. 1413/08) lodged in December 2007 by the publisher of "Risale-i Nur" about the Koptevo District Court ruling (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981). As of 19 February 2013, the ECtHR has yet to reach a decision. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

An analysis of the way that the Russian authorities have used the Pussy Riot case to intensify restrictions on freedom of religion or belief is at F18News 15 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1754.

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.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.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.

More 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.

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