

27 June 2007

RUSSIA: Said Nursi ban brands moderate Muslims as extremist

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

Muslims popularising the work of Said Nursi, a Turkish Muslim theologian, may be at risk of criminal prosecution as extremists, Forum 18 News Service has been told. If an appeal – which may be heard in August - against a Moscow court ban on translations of Nursi's works fails, "anyone in Russia who publishes or distributes the banned publications of Said Nursi will be liable to criminal prosecution," Valeri Kuzmin of Tatarstan's Public Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18. Sergei Sychev, a lawyer who is contesting the ban, estimates that millions of copies of Nursi's work Risale-i Nur - a popular missionary text – are currently in circulation in Russia. Kuzmin has stated that legal action was initiated in response to complaints from relatives "concerned by what was happening to those lured into the Nursi community." Its approximately 200 members in Tatarstan, Kuzmin estimated, "try to sever social ties" in just the same way as "totalitarian sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses." The ban relies solely upon analysis of the work by psychologists and linguists of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Russia's Ombudsman for Human Rights, Vladimir Lukin, and a wide range of Russia's Muslim leaders and scholars has condemned the ban.

Unless an appeal against a Moscow court ban on Said Nursi's Islamic theological literature succeeds, hundreds of Muslims across Russia risk criminal prosecution as extremists for popularising the work of this well-known 20th century moderate Turkish Muslim theologian. "Once the ruling comes into force, anyone in Russia who publishes or distributes the banned publications of Said Nursi will be liable to criminal prosecution," the special investigator at Tatarstan's Public Prosecutor's Office who initiated the case, Valeri Kuzmin, told Forum 18 News Service from the republic's capital Kazan on 26 June. The lawyer fighting the ban, Sergei Sychev, told Forum 18 he fears it will first spark a Soviet-style crackdown on followers of Said Nursi in the traditionally Muslim Volga republic of Tatarstan, "where it already smells like 1937".

Sychev told Forum 18 on 26 June that the appeal was submitted on 24 June, but this will probably not be heard by Moscow City Court until August. If the appeal fails, anyone popularising the contents of Nursi's banned work Risale-i Nur (Messages of Light), Said Nursi's fourteen-part commentary on the Koran and Islam more broadly, could be imprisoned for up to five years under Article 282 of the Criminal Code. Sychev estimates that millions of copies of Risale-i Nur - a popular missionary text – are currently in circulation in Russia.

Forum 18 asked Kuzmin of the Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office where the impetus to investigate Nursi's writings had come from. "I took the decision to launch the criminal case on the basis of analyses I had received from the Russian Academy of Sciences that Nursi's works contain harmful content," he told Forum 18. "But all the initial material was collected by the FSB [Federal Security Service] of Tatarstan. They produced all the testimony on which the criminal case was based." He identified the FSB officer involved as Ildar Galiev. Forum 18 reached Galiev on 26 June but he declined absolutely to answer any questions. "I'm not allowed and not obliged to give any commentary."

Speaking in April 2007, Kuzmin told the Russian-language Rosbalt Information Agency that his office was acting in response to complaints from relatives "concerned by what was happening to those lured into the Nursi community." Its approximately 200 members in Tatarstan, he estimated, "try to sever social ties" in just the same way as "totalitarian sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mother of God Centre [Bogorodichny Tsentr]." Kuzmin claimed, for example, that the husband of one Nursi follower died because she intentionally failed to call an ambulance, "and then she didn't go to his funeral." Insisting that no psychiatrists were involved in the case, he also denied the charge that it bore any resemblance to corrective psychiatry of the Soviet period.

Moscow's Koptevo District Court banned the Russian translation of Risale-i Nur on 21 May. Released on 14 June and citing definitions of extremism from the 2002 Extremism Law, the motivation of the court's written decision is that "the content [of Risale-i Nur] aims to incite religious hatred, propagandise the exclusivity, superiority and inferiority of citizens according to their attitude towards religion, as well as to substantiate and justify the necessity of such activity."

The ban relies solely upon analysis of the work by psychologists and linguists of the Russian Academy of Sciences. As cited in the court's verdict, these experts concluded that Risale-i Nur "attempts to influence the psyche of the reader subconsciously using mechanisms of religious belief, i.e. the formation of conscious values and convictions with an irrational basis," leads to "the destruction of religious equality, expressed in the formation of a negative, aggressive attitude among its target audience towards

adherents of other confessional groups," and "propagandises hatred between Muslims and non-believers."

The trial was held in closed session due to telephone threats allegedly received by one of the expert academic witnesses. Kuzmin of Tatarstan's Public Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 that the decision to hold the hearing behind closed doors was taken by the judge in the case.

Kuzmin defended the ban on Nursi's work but insisted that this was a decision of the court. "I'm satisfied with this court decision," he told Forum 18. He dismissed complaints by Muslim bodies, insisting that the court had reached the right decision on the basis of the expert analyses. "Muslims have their recognised texts, like the Koran, and these were not part of this. I've got nothing against Muslims."

If the ban comes into force, not only will print publications of Nursi's commentary be affected. Asked what would happen about the many websites where Nursi's work is also available in Russian Kuzmin responded: "I don't know what will happen to them, but publication is banned. No doubt the internet service providers will be prosecuted."

Another basis for the Moscow trial, Kuzmin told Rosbalt in April 2007, is the authorities' concern that the activity of Nursi followers is financed from Turkey. While the quality of education in the seven Nursi-inspired Turkish lycees in Tatarstan (whose native Tatar population speaks a Turkic language) has won them a good reputation, he explained, "the problem of teaching ideas at odds with Russian state security remains." He said that the then expected ban on Risale-i Nur by Koptevo District Court would provide "a lawful mechanism to deal with this problem". In Kuzmin's view, the organisers of the lycees "aim to introduce the Turkic factor, to cut off Russian influence as far as possible. (...) If in Kosovo and Bosnia this process is 90 per cent and in Crimea 70 per cent complete, then in Tatarstan it has only reached 30 per cent, and we intend to put a stop to it."

Responding to trial opponents' criticism that experts in the case did not include specialists in religious studies, Kuzmin told Rosbalt: "Our aim was to examine the effect of the texts on a simple, uneducated person, unfamiliar with Islamic history and doctrine."

A year-long criminal investigation into the suspected extremist activities of "unidentified persons" in Tatarstan was closed in March 2006 after it failed to establish "direct intent to incite religious hatred" by those producing, reading and disseminating Said Nursi's works. The very same month, however, the republic's Public Prosecutor filed suit for a ban on Risale-i Nur in Koptevo District Court, the work being published in Moscow. Involved in the text's publication, the Moscow-based Nuru-Badi Foundation and one of Russia's largest Muslim organisations, the Council of Muftis, appeared before the court as interested parties.

Some 50 Muslim women who form a study group centred on Nursi's works in the town of Naberezhnyye Chelny in Tatarstan have complained to Forum 18 that they have been hounded by the local FSB security service for the past two years as a prelude to the ban (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=991).

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. Today, however, his works are freely available in Turkey, where his followers – known in Turkish as "Nurcular" – operate their own foundations and mosques.

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 wrote in an open letter to Koptevo District Court on 8 May. "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." The ombudsman also alluded to negative Soviet experience. "We must also avoid a repeat of the prohibitions and persecutions of those with dissenting views and faiths that are characteristic of undemocratic, totalitarian states."

A wide range of Russia's Muslim leaders and scholars has also roundly condemned the trial. Ravil Gainutdin, who chairs the Council of Muftis, recently wrote an open letter to President Vladimir Putin describing the Risale-i Nur ban as "a crude violation of freedom of conscience in our country". Speaking to Forum 18 in late March, his vice-chairman Marat Murtazin insisted that Nursi's works are not extremist. "If you are going to take issue with him, then you can find similar in any religious literature – in fact, there are more difficult moments in works by other authors," Murtazin, who is also rector of Moscow Islamic University, maintained. "Of course, something must be banned if it says, 'Kill all Russians and Jews!' But if it contains no call to violence, there is no reason to ban it."

Rafik Mukhametshin, the rector of Tatarstan's Russian Islamic University, suggested at a 17 May Moscow press conference that a ban would "lead to the blurring of boundaries between extremist and normal theological literature." He included Said Nursi's works in the latter category. The head of Nuri-Badi Foundation, Ibragim Ibragimov claimed that during 15 years' distribution of Nursi's books in Russia, "there hasn't been a single case in which someone did something illegal after reading them." Sheikh Nafigulla Ashirov, who heads the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Asiatic Russia, warned of a return to Soviet practice. "Even though the times of Glavlit [the early Soviet state censorship organ] appear to be long gone, censorship is creeping back under the guise of the

fight against extremism."

Last year Moscow Public Prosecutor's Office ordered a local human rights NGO to remove from its website Ashirov's statement questioning the soundness of Russia's ban on the controversial Islamist political movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, on the grounds that it could be viewed as justification of terrorism (see F18News 10 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=756).

In a 24 April 2006 expert analysis for the aborted Tatarstan case similar to that featured in Koptevo District Court, psychologists and psychiatrists argued 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". They also interpreted the Turkish theologian's reference to "the sword of strong faith" as "a concept of opposition and war which could lead to defensive behaviour". Nursi's criticism of the impact of atheist ideology – such as in, "materialists cannot accommodate the postulates of faith in their spiritually limited and withered minds and spiritually deadened and ruined hearts" – they equated with "the creation of a negative emotional evaluation (..) of non-believers as a social group."

In their August 2006 critique of this analysis, the Council of Muftis maintained that its compilers had "confused exclusivity, superiority and inferiority of citizens according to their attitude to religion with the concept of the truth and exclusivity of religious teaching or the Koran." In the Soviet period, "when any religion was declared 'a remnant of the past'," the Muslim representatives pointed out, "atheist psychiatrists described the very same mechanisms of religious influence upon the psyche."

One Tatarstan-based psychiatric expert who worked on the analysis, Svetlana Yakovleva, was selected to conduct a similar study for a trial of unidentified Muslims suspected of distributing extremist literature at a city market in late 2004 (see F18News 20 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=765).

An earlier attempt to punish distribution of one part of Risale-i Nur in Russia proved unsuccessful. On 6 April 2005 Kirov District Court in the Siberian city of Omsk acquitted Dzhambul Isabayev of extremism – specifically, "intentional acts aimed at inciting hatred and enmity and humiliating the dignity of the human person and of groups of people on the basis of their nationality and attitude towards religion" – for circulating copies of "Fruits of Faith". According to an expert analysis by a local anthropologist submitted to the court, the work contains "open propaganda about the inferiority of citizens due to their religious affiliation" because it maintains that Islam is superior to other religious systems. Even before this analysis was conducted, however, a public prosecutor's office report determined that the brochures seized from Isabayev "displayed extremist content".

In their 28 December 2004 critique of the anthropologist's testimony, the Council of Muftis successfully argued that the public profession of belief in the superiority of one's own religious world view over other world views – "which is held by every believer in every religion" – does not constitute extremist propaganda of the superiority of citizens according to their attitude towards religion, "if it is unaccompanied by calls for illegal acts in relation to adherents of other world views, such as that they be unlawfully deprived of their constitutional human and civil rights."

Expert analyses of questionable authority have latterly been increasingly employed as the principal evidence in legal cases seeking to prosecute Muslims for extremist activity (see F18News 20 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=765). The first Islamic theological text to be banned, by Moscow's Savelov District Court in April 2004, was "The Book of Monotheism" by Mohammed ibn Abdul-Wahhab. Muslims began to complain to Forum 18 about increased scrutiny of their literature around the same time (see F18News 14 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=410).

Accompanying a group of children on a 30 May excursion around Taganrog's OMON special police base in the southern region of Rostov-on-Don, local press photographer Mikhail Noltin was surprised to see an Arabic copy of the Koran amid a display of "agitational literature belonging to religious extremists". A photograph of the display can be seen on his weblog, at <http://tigranik.livejournal.com/146632.html>. (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News 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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