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RUSSIA: The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?

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A turning point in the Russian authorities' drive against "religious extremism" came in 2007, when two previous unsuccessful attempts to ban Islamic literature were finally successful, as this analysis - the second part of a presentation given at a seminar at the Kennan Institute in Washington DC - notes. Also initiated that year was the Federal List of Extremist Materials, which now contains 367 items. Anyone who distributes these works can be fined. Alongside genuinely extremist material are some works Forum 18 News Service has seen which appear to contain no calls to extremism. "The Personality of a Muslim", a popular work among Russian Muslims, was deemed extremist in August 2007 and several distributors of it have since been fined. Indigenous pagans and Jehovah's Witnesses are facing accusations of extremism on the basis of their literature, even though none of it is on the banned list. The appointment of Aleksandr Dvorkin, a prominent "anti-cult" activist, to head the Justice Ministry's Expert Religious Studies Council has alarmed those who hoped officials would curb the widespread use of extremism accusations.

In 2007, some five years after the Russian state unleashed its drive against "religious extremism", a turning point was reached. That year, two attempts to ban Islamic literature which had previously failed finally succeeded. One was the case against the writings of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Previously, in April 2005, a district court in Omsk acquitted Dzhabul Isabayev of extremism for distributing one part of "Risale-i Nur" (Messages of Light), Nursi's 14-part commentary on the Koran. In doing so, the court rejected an expert analysis by a local anthropologist who - as would later become the norm - claimed that the work contains "open propaganda about the inferiority of citizens due to their religious affiliation" simply because it maintains that Islam is superior to other religious systems.

Similarly, whereas the 2002 Yekaterinburg investigation into several Muslim titles failed to reach court, Buguruslan City Court in Orenburg Region ruled "The Personality of a Muslim" and 15 other Islamic titles extremist in August 2007. Finally published almost a year later, the verdict does not cite the work, but maintains it should be banned because it "contains factors facilitating incitement of hatred between peoples due to their attitude towards religion" and "alters the behavioural reactions in society of people who accept the ideas it proposes".

So what is in this allegedly dangerously extremist book? A close reading fails to uncover anything remotely sinister. To give an idea, the following are three sentences selected at random: "One of the qualities of a true Muslim is that he never thinks badly of other people" (p.253); "The reason for the tragic state of humankind is that the just and humane principles of Islam have been pushed aside by defective principles thought up by people themselves" (p.143); "A true Muslim .. is generous and always offers his hand to other members of the society in which he lives" (p.329).

"The Personality of a Muslim" is a popular work among Russian Muslims, and in 2008 there were several successful prosecutions for its distribution. In Saratov, the manager of a bookshop with two copies on sale was fined 2,000 roubles (521 Norwegian Kroner, 59 Euros or 73 US Dollars). A Moscow court fined the Novy Knizhny chain of bookstores 50,000 roubles (10,809 Norwegian Kroner, 1,160 Euros or 1,535 US Dollars) for stocking it. In Kaluga, the book was confiscated from a mosque whose Muslim community was, as it told Forum 18, later fined 3,000 Roubles (648 Norwegian Kroner, 70 Euros or 92 US Dollars).

On these occasions the authorities chose to prosecute under the Administrative Violations Code (Article 20, Part 29), under which production or distribution of extremist materials carries a maximum fine of 100,000 Roubles (19,770 Norwegian Kroner, 2,270 Euros or 3,020 US Dollars). In other cases they might choose to prosecute under the Criminal Code, however, where the maximum punishment for incitement to religious hatred is a two-year prison term (Article 282).

Another key development in 2007 was the publication of the first instalment of the Federal List of Extremist Materials, which as of 6 April 2009 ran to 367 items. Judging by some of their titles - such as "Music for Whites" and "Jewish Fascism, or the Genocide of the Russian People" - many of these are either extreme nationalist or anti-Semitic, but Nursi's "Risale-i Nur" and "The Personality of a Muslim" also feature. While the Justice Ministry compiles the list, it does not have vetting powers over it, so in practice any low-level court can rule a work extremist. It is then automatically added to the list and banned throughout Russia. This is how a legal authority such as Gorodishche District Court in Penza Region can ban a 1980s address by the late Iranian Supreme Leader,

Ayatollah Khomeini, as happened in 2008.

At the beginning of 2008, Mufti Mukadas Bibarsov, who heads the Volga Muslim Spiritual Directorate, suggested to Forum 18 that, "If Islamic books are banned today, tomorrow they will be Jewish, the day after tomorrow Catholic, the day after that Orthodox." Something of that has now begun. The Mari people, who are ethnically Finno-Ugric and live mostly in the Volga republic of Mari-El, have an unbroken tradition of paganism involving animal sacrifice and worship in sacred groves. They underwent similar persecution to other confessions in the Soviet period, although they were permitted to hold a massive thanksgiving ceremony for victory in the Second World War.

While Mari paganism now has "traditional confession" status locally, one of its main karts or priests, Vitali Tanakov, is facing religious and other extremism charges for his brochure "A Priest Speaks". The only references in it to other religions claim that, while the Mari faith will be "in demand by the whole world for many millennia," under the influence of the Bible and Koran, harmony between the individual and society has been lost, "morality has gone to seed, there is no pity, charity, mutual aid; everyone and everything are infected by falsehood." In December 2006, Yoshkar-Ola City Court in Mari-El sentenced Tanakov to 120 hours' labour for writing and distributing this brochure, which he completed as an electrician in a local school. The brochure itself was ruled extremist by the same court on 17 March 2009.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are currently fighting five separate religious extremism cases in Rostov-on-Don Region, Sverdlovsk Region, Altai Republic and North Ossetia for distributing their standard tracts such as "Watchtower" and "Awake!" In Rostov-on-Don Region, 24 local Jehovah's Witness communities received virtually identical warnings about extremist activity in late 2007, after an expert analysis by a local philologist found their literature "incites hatred towards the Christian world".

In Sverdlovsk Region, extremism warnings issued in May 2008 against two local communities followed the seizure of literature from a local Kingdom Hall and an expert literary analysis by the FSB security service. Since the start of 2009, 14 Jehovah's Witnesses in Sverdlovsk Region have been detained for several hours at a time for preaching and distributing literature, even though the extremism investigation there has not yet reached court.

As local authorities and low-level courts are instigating cases resulting in nationwide bans, it could be argued that this situation is the product of a technical oversight when the Extremism Law was drafted. Despite growing criticism, however, the federal authorities have not taken a single step to reverse this trend. A number of prominent Muslims sent a 3,000-signature petition to then President Vladimir Putin in March 2007, but a subsequent response from the presidential administration said that only the courts could administer justice.

When the lawyer Sergei Sychev subsequently tried to appeal against Buguruslan City Court's ruling on "The Personality of a Muslim", he was told that only interested parties - the author and the publisher - could mount a challenge. In this case, that is impossible, as the author is dead and the publisher defunct. As is typical, the ruling also became widely known only once the title was entered onto the Federal List of Extremist Materials some months after the court's decision, by which time the deadline for appeals was long past.

In June 2008, a senior official in the presidential administration, Aleksei Grishin, called for a special expert council to fix the criteria for the addition of Islamic books to the Federal List of Extremist Materials. In November he even admitted that "books by very famous authors seem to have got on by mistake, unfortunately." He promised to take corrective measures, but warned that it would prove very difficult to remove titles from the list "as it is extremely complicated to overturn a court decision already in force."

On 11 March 2009, Mufti Ravil Gainutdin, who chairs the Council of Muftis, raised the issue of outlawed Islamic literature at a high-profile meeting of the Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations, a consultative body for religious communities attached to the presidential administration. President Dmitri Medvedev, who chaired the meeting, replied that "the quality of expertise in these sorts of problems should be the highest possible." He supported Gainutdin's suggestion for a federal expert council to deal with the situation and said he would order one to be created.

In fact revived shortly before this meeting, the Justice Ministry's Expert Religious Studies Council is far from what Gainutdin had in mind. Since 18 February, when its powers and procedures were approved by a Justice Ministry decree, the Council has had powers to investigate a religious organisation or its literature for practically any reason, including extremism. Its new line-up suggests that religious extremism charges will now be directed even more broadly than those outlined above.

The Council's new chair, Aleksandr Dvorkin, is Russia's most prominent "anti-cult" activist. As soon as Moscow's Golovinsky District Court pronounced its verdict banning the Jehovah's Witnesses' Moscow organisation in May 2004, he went up to the Public Prosecutor's Office representative who had pressed for the ban and warmly congratulated her. One of Dvorkin's assistants is Roman Silantyev, whose book on Islam in modern Russia treats Nursi followers as dangerous extremists. At a hearing in Russia's Public Chamber on 3 March which considered the issue of banned Islamic literature, Silantyev suggested that the authorities were working in the right direction. He also remarked, "Let's ban all books published in Saudi Arabia, everyone knows that Russia has bad relations with the USA, so we should ban books from countries that are in the American orbit."

Do these developments mark a return to past methods? Two statements from those on either side of the battle against religious extremism are at least reminiscent of the Soviet drive against all forms of dissent.

The first comes from Lyubov Sliska, First Deputy Speaker of the Russian Duma (the lower house of Parliament) and a member of its United Russia faction. In September 2008 she said: "Preventative measures are the main thing which should be done now to lower the risk of the appearance and spread of sectarian and extremist ideology. The educational aspect of work by our main Russian confessions will put an end to sectarian extremism."

The second comes from Isa Bedtsiyev, a Chechen Muslim who frequents the mosque in Kaluga from which "The Personality of a Muslim" was taken in an FSB security service raid in May 2008. At a press conference in Moscow in March 2009, he explained that he no longer keeps books at home, because, "I know that if someone comes to search my home, they'll find something. In Russia, if they launch a fight against something - a committee to fight against aliens, for example - they'll find them."

- This is an adapted version of the second part of a seminar presentation given at the Kennan Institute, Washington DC, on 14 April 2009. For the first part, 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began', see F18News 27 April 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287>. (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>.

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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