FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

This article was published by F18News on: 10 December 2012

RUSSIA: China-led restrictions on Falun Gong

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>

Russia's small community of followers of the Chinese spiritual practice of Falun Gong face increasing state pressure, Forum 18 News Service notes. In 2005, officials refused to register a newspaper, citing provisions of the 2001 China-Russia treaty "On Neighbourly Relations, Friendship and Co-operation". The movement's core spiritual text "Zhuan Falun" has been included on the Federal List of Extremist Materials and courts have blocked access to websites containing the text. Four practitioners were detained in Vladivostok in July, while "anti-extremism" police summoned three local leaders in southern European Russia. In the latest deportations, two Ukrainian Falun Gong practitioners were barred from Russia in September when they tried to attend the movement's annual conference near Moscow. One had to move his wedding from Russia to Ukraine, as he told Forum 18. A similar Russian desire not to alienate the Chinese lies behind repeated denials of a Russian visa to the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader the Dalai Lama.

Russia has stepped up pressure on followers of the Chinese spiritual practice of Falun Gong in recent years, Forum 18 News Service notes, using literature bans, deportations and close surveillance to limit their activity. As with Moscow's long-standing refusal to allow a pastoral visit by the Dalai Lama to Russia's Buddhists, this seems intended to please Beijing.

Falun Gong is an Eastern spiritual practice popularised in China since the early 1990s by its founder, Li Hongzhi. It follows in the tradition of qi gong, a combination of meditative exercise and natural therapy widely and uncontroversially practised in China for fitness and health. Li's variant adds a strong moral-spiritual component, however; all thoughts and actions must harmonise with the universal principles of Truth, Compassion and Endurance. Although distinct from Buddhism, Falun Gong has that faith's same goal of spiritual enlightenment.

The Chinese authorities at first regarded Falun Gong positively, but the movement's growing influence led to a harsh state crackdown on practitioners from 1999 (see F18News 31 March 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=292>).

Beijing has since claimed Falun Gong to be "an out-and-out evil cult" that "concocts a whole set of lies and heretical fallacies to deceive people", in the terms of a November 2003 statement issued by the Chinese Embassy in Australia.

Falun Gong practitioners maintain their movement's growing influence in fact led to the crackdown in China. "The Chinese Communist Party couldn't tolerate any other formations or leaders being popular," Moscow-based practitioner Juliana Kim told Forum 18 on 15 November. "Their ideology is built on struggle, the search for enemies - and here the enemy is yourself, your passions and weaknesses."

Who follows Falun Gong in Russia?

Kim's Moscow group includes a wide variety of ages and ethnicities, she told Forum 18. She herself is an ethnic Korean, native speaker of Russian who was raised in Uzbekistan, a destination for Koreans deported from the Russian Far East by Stalin in 1937.

Kim encountered Falun Gong eight years ago after becoming interested in Eastern mysticism through writers such as Helen Blavatsky and Nikolai Roerich, popular in Russia. The practice suited her because "I wanted to stay boss, and you don't have to be a member, donate money or follow rules," she told Forum 18. Initially anxious about falling into a "sect", she was "cautious until satisfied that practitioners aren't fixated or zombified."

Chinese pressure

Falun Gong practitioners in Russia believe they are harassed in order to satisfy Beijing. "Not wishing to quarrel with China, our government violates our Constitution, and our rights are violated," 59-year-old Yuri from Abakan (Khakassia republic, southern Siberia) commented to the website forum of Novaya Gazeta newspaper on 18 December 2011.

There is some evidence of this. Seen by Forum 18, on 9 September 2005 the Media Registration and Licensing Department within Russia's Culture Ministry rejected an application to register Falun Gong Today newspaper due to Article 8 of the 2001 China-Russia

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treaty "On Neighbourly Relations, Friendship and Co-operation". This provision bars signatories from "allowing the creation or activity on their territory of organisations or groups that harm the sovereignty, security or territorial integrity" of the other.

Falun Gong was denied legal status in Kyrgyzstan (see F18News 22 March 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=529>) and Moldova (see F18News 16 June 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1313>) after Chinese government influence.

Buddhists affected

The 2001 treaty - or China's position - have been repeatedly cited by Russia's Foreign Ministry as grounds for rejecting Buddhists' annual requests for a pastoral visit by the Dalai Lama of Tibet. This is despite Buddhism's informal status in Russia as a supposedly privileged "traditional" religion, Forum 18 notes.

Again refusing a visit in 2012, Deputy Head of the Foreign Ministry's Asia Department, Georgy Zinoviev, explained that the Dalai Lama's March 2011 announcement of his withdrawal from politics "has not led to any progress", while his more constructive dialogue with China's leadership "would allow His Holiness to make a trip to our country in the foreseeable future," the Russian-language website Save Tibet reported on 26 September.

Zinoviev refused to elaborate further on his late September letter to Russia's Buddhist organisations. "I set out everything I could in the letter to them," he told Forum 18 from the Foreign Ministry on 10 December. "If you have any further questions, you must send an official enquiry."

"I live in Russia, not China," monk Tenzin Chinba of the Association of Tuvan Buddhists told the website in response. "When a vital question for Russian Buddhists is being decided, why is it proposed that the 'negative evaluations' of the Chinese People's Republic should guide us?"

The Dalai Lama visited the Russian republic of Kalmykia for one day in 2004, but has not visited Russia's other traditionally Buddhist regions - Buryatia and Tuva - for 20 years (see F18News 2 August 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=622>).

Restrictions

Russia's Falun Gong practitioners admit they do not suffer severe restrictions as in China. "The fuss raised in Europe is holding the Russian authorities back," believes practitioner Juliana Kim. Specifying Falun Gong and the Jehovah's Witnesses, a 14 February 2012 European Parliament resolution expressed "deep concern about the misuse of anti-extremism legislation" against civil society organisations and religious minorities, as well as "the improper banning of their materials on grounds of extremism" (Resolution RC-B7-0052/2012, Point K.14).

Yet Moscow's comparatively relaxed attitude could also be due to the small number of active Falun Gong practitioners in Russia, Forum 18 notes. According to Kim, approximately 50 people attend weekly public meetings in Moscow, with other significant groups found in St Petersburg, Krasnodar, Rostov-on-Don and Irkutsk. Up to 400 gather for an annual conference near Moscow, she added. Approximately 20 people attend regular meetings of the Krasnodar group, its chair Mikhail Sinistyn told Forum 18 from that southern city on 27 November.

Literature ban

Falun Gong practitioners are under pressure, however. The harshest restriction is the inclusion of their core spiritual text "Zhuan Falun" on the Federal List of Extremist Materials (see F18News 14 December 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1782>).

"It's like the Bible for Christians," Falun Gong practitioner Mikhail Sinitsyn explained to Forum 18. "We can't share it with others by publishing or distributing it. Naturally this decision also puts limitations on those who are interested and would like to practise."

A lawyer, Sinitsyn noted that people should be able to keep a single copy for personal use. Yet a single copy of "Zhuan Falun" was confiscated on 27 July 2012, when police detained four Falun Gong practitioners in the Pacific port of Vladivostok, the Falun Dafa Information Centre reported on 31 July. According to Juliana Kim, the interrogators were mainly concerned about whether the practitioners intended to demonstrate at or disrupt September's APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation) summit, held in Vladivostok and with senior Chinese officials participating.

Falun Gong practitioners have removed "Zhuan Falun" from their Russian website to avoid its closure, Sinitsyn told Forum 18. While the title is still featured on foreign-hosted domains, he did not know how far Russian regions have succeeded in implementing restrictions on accessing them. On 6 June 2011 Samara's Industrial District Court ordered five internet providers on its territory to limit access to a website - redacted in the text of the ruling seen by Forum 18 - that featured "Zhuan Falun".

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Similar court orders have targeted other religious literature controversially ruled extremist. Since early 2011, websites featuring writings by Said Nursi, an Islamic theologian from Turkey, have been blocked in Krasnoyarsk and Lipetsk regions. Since late 2011, access to Jehovah's Witness websites has been blocked by courts in Buryatia, Chuvashia and Mari El republics, Altai and Transbaikal krais, Belgorod, Ivanovo, Kemerovo, Krasnodar and Lipetsk regions (see F18News 2 December 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1642>).

Surveillance

Despite the ban on "Zhuan Falun", Falun Gong practitioners are able to meet regularly to read and discuss the movement's literature. The Moscow group gathers at weekends at premises belonging to a university whose administrators know its identity, Juliana Kim told Forum 18. Mikhail Sinitsyn said his Krasnodar group is small enough to meet in private homes.

Sinitsyn spoke to Forum 18 shortly after returning from a talk with officials of Krasnodar region's "E Centre", the section of the Department for Interior Affairs that deals with extremism. Falun Gong practitioners in the nearby cities of Novorossiisk and Korenovsk had been summoned for similar meetings at the same time, he noted. Yet while unusual, Sinitsyn did not find this troubling. Newly appointed officials "just wanted to know who we are," he explained to Forum 18.

During his conversation with them, they acknowledged that they do not view Falun Gong as a threat to society, Sinitsyn added, "but it seems there is some kind of pressure from above."

As with the recent detentions in Vladivostok, state harassment is more likely if the authorities expect Falun Gong practitioners to stage a public event critical of China's religion policy, according to Juliana Kim.

In September 2012 Russian blogger and Falun Gong practitioner "Analitik" reported that an organiser of this year's Falun Gong conference was telephoned by the FSB security police and asked to provide a list of participants, which the organiser refused to do. "Of course, this is rather strange - after all, the FSB have known us for 15 years (..) and nothing has happened in all that time to justify their concern in any way. They must just really love us."

Deportations

While that conference went ahead as planned from 15-18 September near Moscow, Kim told Forum 18 that two Ukrainian Falun Gong practitioners were barred from Russia when they tried to attend the event. Travelling by overnight bus from the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, Yevgeny Brug was removed at the border, while Alla Lavrinenko was detained for 24 hours at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport before being sent on a flight back to the Crimean city of Simferopol.

Brug did not receive any kind of document or explanation as to why he was being refused entry to Russia, he told Forum 18 from Kiev on 4 December. "They just said you're denied entry to the Russian Federation." Nor did he receive a stamp in his passport indicating that he had been barred.

In fact, Brug has not received any official confirmation on any of the several occasions he has been denied entry to Russia in the past six years, he told Forum 18 (he has also been admitted several times in the same period). The first refusal was in 2007, when Brug was already inside Russia and arrived at a Moscow railway station on his way to the annual Falun Gong conference. Stopped by police and informed that he was in the country illegally, he was ordered to leave, he told Forum 18.

Brug's post-conference plans to marry a Russian citizen (also a Falun Gong practitioner) in her hometown of Nizhny Novgorod had to be delayed and the location changed to Kiev, he added.

Brug is certain his Falun Gong connection is behind the travel ban. While living in Moscow in 2006, he was detained when reporting on a Falun Gong demonstration outside the Chinese Embassy and when attempting to take a train to St Petersburg with other Falun Gong practitioners before the G8 Summit, he told Forum 18. Police took his passport details on both occasions.

Like fellow Ukrainian citizen Brug, Alla Lavrinenko did not receive official confirmation on being refused entry to Russia on 13 September. Border guards at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport said she was on "a list of people refused entry" but added that they did not know why, she told Forum 18 on 4 December. When Lavrinenko asked for written confirmation of this, border guards refused, telling her that she would receive a full explanation from a Russian state representative as soon as she landed back in Simferopol. "But there was no Russian state representative in Simferopol Airport," she remarked to Forum 18.

On later telephoning the Russian Consulate in Simferopol, she was told they had nothing to do with the incident, she said, and advised to contact Domodedovo's Border Guard Service.

"Where did you get this number?" a representative of Domodedovo's Border Guard Service demanded as soon as Forum 18 explained that confirmation of the deportation of a female Ukrainian citizen was the reason for calling on 4 December. "All

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questions to the press service of the FSB!" he instructed, before ending the call.

A spokesperson at the FSB's press service told Forum 18 on 6 December that questions are only accepted in writing. By email the same day, Forum 18 asked for confirmation of Lavrinenko's deportation - and the grounds for it, if confirmed.

In early June 2009, a Moldovan Falun Gong practitioner whose passport details had been taken by FSB officers at the 2007 Moscow conference was also denied entry to Russia and returned to the Moldovan capital, Chisinau. "I didn't believe at the time that they would include us in their entry black list," the practitioner told Forum 18 soon after the entry denial. "In Moscow airport they put no stamp in my [Moldovan] passport, they simply drew up a document which they would not give me."

According to Juliana Kim, Russia's Falun Gong practitioners did not experience obstruction until 2007, when OMON riot police cordoned off the Moscow conference "as if we were extremists, terrorists". While heavy-handed restrictions are still rare, she pointed out that the public stigma of such actions is damaging in Russia as well as China. "For years under the communists people have been taught that if the state persecutes someone, there's a reason for it." (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>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

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f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY