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RUSSIA: Are Turkish teachers, traditional pagans and Jehovah's Witnesses religious extremists?

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

Tatar-Turkish lycees, traditional Mari paganism, and Jehovah's Witnesses are all being officially accused of religious extremism in Russia, Forum 18 News Service has found. Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office has warned a Tatar-Turkish Lycee that Turkish teachers – who make up one quarter of the staff – are holding secret discussions with pupils about religion. Marat Fattiyev, the headteacher, insisted that "there is no basis whatsoever for these accusations." Fattiyev told Forum 18 that "the lycees are secular institutions – there isn't even any tuition about religion here." The case is linked to the earlier ban on works by moderate Turkish theologian Said Nursi. Traditional pagan beliefs in Mari-El also face religious extremism allegations, as well as a media ban on advertising centuries-old ploughing festival worship. Also suspecting extremist activity, the Public Prosecutor's Office in Rostov-on-Don has ordered its local offices "to investigate local communities of Jehovah's Witnesses and to consider filing applications for their liquidation." Levelling religious extremism charges against such disfavoured religious – and non-religious – groupings undermines the charges' reliability.

As Russia's new president, Dmitry Medvedev, praises the country's recent record on combating religious extremism, several recent charges show that attention is shifting beyond locally controversial Islamic subjects onto a wider range of religious-related subjects, Forum 18 News Service has found. The targets of extremism allegations now include Tatar-Turkish lycees, traditional Mari paganism, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

President Medvedev told the FSB security service on 13 May that "serious attention should be paid to counteracting manifestations of ethnic and religious intolerance," Interfax news agency reported. While there has been a "qualitative change" in the fight against extremism over the past eight years, he added, "We must not stop at what has been achieved."

Islamic literature again dominates the latest instalment of the Federal List of Extremist Materials, published on 16 May. This month also saw raids on suspected Islamic extremists in the Russian republics of Tatarstan and Mordovia and the closure of an allegedly extremist Islamic women's hospital in Dagestan Republic, all with FSB involvement, Islam.ru website reported.

Similar religious extremism charges – most recently the inclusion of an Islamic book promoting tolerance in the Federal List of Extremist Materials – are themselves sometimes suspect, Forum 18 has found (see F18News 1 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1080).

Now, however, religious extremism charges are being levelled against disfavoured religious – and even non-religious – groupings, further undermining the soundness of such allegations in general.

In recent days, current and past pupils of Tatar-Turkish lycees have held meetings and demonstrations against their possible closure in the Tatar capital Kazan, Islam.ru reported on 23 May. Competition for places is fierce at Tatarstan's seven such lycees, state secondary schools where roughly a quarter of teachers are Turkish and tuition in science subjects is in English.

The Turkish teachers' visas were extended by only a month – or until 31 May – in the wake of an 11 April warning from Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office, the headteacher of Kazan's Tatar-Turkish Lycee No 4, Marat Fattiyev, told Forum 18 on 20 May.

Among general educational complaints also disputed by Fattiyev, the warning claims that the lycees violate Article 1, Part 5 of the 1992 Education Law (a ban on the creation of religious organisations in state institutions) and Article 5, Part 4 of the 1997 Religion Law (stipulating parental consent for religious education on state school premises) by conducting "religious propaganda", he said. The lycee director also read Forum 18 a passage from the 11 April document which maintains that the Turkish teachers are holding secret discussions with pupils about religion.

"There is no basis whatsoever for these accusations," Fattiyev insisted to Forum 18. "We have every ethnicity and confession here, without selection – even Hare Krishna. The lycees are secular institutions – there isn't even any tuition about religion here."

The Public Prosecutor's Office warning, however, links its allegations to Criminal Investigation No 300079. Fattiyev was not familiar with this investigation's number, but previous, separate correspondence from the Office viewed by Forum 18 confirms it as the religious extremism case opened "due to the activity of the religious-nationalist sect Nurdzhular" (a russification of "Nurcular", Turkish for "Nursi followers").

Both before and after Moscow's Koptevo District Court banned as extremist the Russian translation of works by moderate Turkish theologian Said Nursi on 21 May 2007, law enforcement agencies have conducted raids on the homes of his readers across Russia (see most recently F18News 13 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1061).

A particular target is a Nursi study group of about 50 Muslim women in Naberezhnyye Chelny (Tatarstan), who have even been subject to forced psychiatric examinations (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=992).

The women insist that no organised Nursi movement exists, let alone a "Nurdzhular sect" (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=991).

On 10 April 2008, however, Russia's Supreme Court banned "the international religious organisation Nurdzhular" as extremist. While aware of this decision, Nursi readers have yet to experience repercussions, one of the Naberezhnyye Chelny women, Alsu Khusayenova, told Forum 18 on 15 May. She added that her group does not have any connections with or knowledge of the Tatar-Turkish lycees.

Two state check-ups on Lycee No 4 in July and September 2007 nevertheless sought Nursi literature, its director told Forum 18, "but they didn't find anything - there wasn't anything to find." Public Prosecutor's Office and Education Ministry officials showed Fattiyev documentation related to the second check-up which alleged that the lycees' Turkish teachers are "disseminating banned literature by Said Nursi," he said. They then photocopied pages from the lycees' English-language physics, chemistry, maths and information technology textbooks, all published in Turkey, continued Fattiyev. "We thought it was ridiculous!"

The lycees are currently disputing the Public Prosecutor's Office's complaints in Tatarstan's Arbitration Court.

Last year's check-ups on the Tatar-Turkish lycees were unconnected with Said Nursi, Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office press officer Ravil Vakhitov insisted to Forum 18 on 27 May, "We weren't looking for those books." Nor was his Office's recent warning linked to the Nursi ban, he maintained: "There were violations of various federal laws – practically nothing connected with religion." Asked to clarify, Vakhitov stated that the lycees had not been accused of conducting "religious propaganda".

In the neighbouring republic of Mari-El, traditional pagan beliefs also face religious extremism allegations. Unlike in Western Europe, Mari paganism is a long-standing tradition rather than a New Age construction. With Orthodoxy and Islam, "the Mari traditional faith" even holds the status of traditional religion in Mari-El.

Local Mari national organisation Mari Ushem (Mari Union) was nevertheless barred from advertising its 25 May Agavairem (ploughing festival) worship in Mari-El's state media, the group's chairperson Nina Maksimova told Forum 18 on 23 May. Only one newspaper - the Mari-language Kugarnya (Friday) – agreed to publish a small announcement, she said. According to Maksimova, local media employees – such as the chief editor of Radio Mari-El – either refuse Mari Ushem's advertisements without explanation or say that they are following orders from above.

"But the people have been holding these prayers from century to century, and they will go nevertheless," Maksimova told Forum 18. Even without publicity, she said, over 100 people – Russians and Chuvash as well as Mari – would gather at Oak Grove near the capital, Yoshkar-Ola, for the celebration, she said, at which Mari priests recite prayers to Mother Earth before those gathered share specially baked loaves and pies.

The chief editor of Mari-El Radio, Valeri Mochayev, insisted on 26 May that his radio station does not refuse advertisements, including from Mari Ushem. "But they have to be submitted in writing, as my bosses will ask me to account for it, and I can't do that without a document," he explained to Forum 18. Mari Ushem does not wish to comply with this procedure, Mochayev maintained.

Asked why Mari Ushem was barred from advertising its Agavairem worship, Maksimova told Forum 18 that she is "also seeking the answer to that question." She believes the source is Mari-El's government, however, and that, "It is probably for political reasons." While active in promoting Mari traditional culture, Mari Ushem representatives are also highly critical of the republic's current regime.

The media blackout comes as one of the main priests of the Mari traditional faith and Mari Ushem activist Vitali Tanakov faces renewed religious and other extremism charges for his Russian-language brochure "Onaen Oila" ("A Priest Speaks"), he confirmed to Forum 18 on 23 May. "They say it incites religious hatred, but that is because I criticise the state structure here," Tanakov remarked. "Religious hatred is just a pretext – there is no religious hatred and nothing much religious in there, really." Academics of Mari-El State University are currently conducting a new expert analysis of the brochure, he told Forum 18.

The brochure – which Forum 18 has read – extols the traditional Mari faith, claiming it will be "in demand by the whole world for many millennia." One of its few statements about other faiths, by contrast, maintains that, "demonic forces, striving for power, wealth, created religious doctrines formulated on the basis of god-personalities that shape and code human consciousness into fear and submission, a feeling of pointlessness as creatures and non-entities." Peoples influenced by the Bible and the Koran, believes Tanakov, "have lost harmony between the individual and the people; morality has gone to seed, there is no pity, charity, mutual aid; everyone and everything are infected by falsehood."

Accused of inciting religious and ethnic hatred for writing and distributing the brochure, Vitali Tanakov was sentenced to 120 hours' labour by Yoshkar-Ola City Court on 25 December 2006, even though expert analyses by several Russian universities gave opposing assessments of the text. Tanakov completed his sentence as an electrician at a local secondary school, he told Forum 18.

On 8 August 2007 Yoshkar-Ola City Court ruled "Onaen Oila" extremist following an appeal by Yoshkar-Ola Public Prosecutor's Office. Tanakov responded by filing a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights on 13 August, arguing in part that the existence of the Mari traditional faith was under threat. On 26 September 2007 Mari-El Supreme Court overturned the lower decision and ordered a retrial, in connection with which Yoshkar-Ola City Court has ordered the latest expert analysis.

Nina Maksimova of Mari Ushem initially faced similar extremism charges for distributing the brochure, but the case against her "appears to have been closed," she told Forum 18.

Senior media relations assistant at Mari-El Public Prosecutor's Office, Natalya Purtova, told Forum 18 on 26 May that she could not comment to foreign journalists without prior approval from the General Public Prosecutor's Office in Moscow.

At the General Public Prosecutor's Office, Forum 18 was told the same day that no comment could be made about Vitali Tanakov's or any other ongoing court case, "as it could be viewed as pressure on the court."

Also suspecting extremist activity, the Public Prosecutor's Office in the southern region of Rostov-on-Don ordered its local offices on 7 September 2007 "to investigate local communities of Jehovah's Witnesses and to consider filing applications for their liquidation," Matthew Pannell of the Jehovah's Witnesses' St Petersburg legal department told Forum 18 on 20 May.

A 19 November 2007 warning issued by Volgodonsk Public Prosecutor's Office, viewed by Forum 18, warns local Jehovah's Witnesses that it is currently conducting a joint investigation with the local FSB into their activity.

A 3 September 2007 literary analysis by Rostov Centre for Court Expert Studies found that texts distributed by the congregation and published by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania - including "Who Really Rules the World?" and "What Does the Bible Really Teach?" - "contain statements humiliating a person's dignity on the principle of his or her attitude to religion, elements of propaganda of the exclusivity of one religion over another," it points out. According to the Office, this equates to "incitement of religious hatred; propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of a person on account of his or her attitude towards religion; the violation of the rights and legal interests of the person and citizen dependent upon his or her attitude towards religion" – all banned under the 2002 Extremism Law.

The two texts named in the warning are distributed by the Jehovah's Witnesses without impediment in numerous countries.

"We don't know where this is coming from, or why," Pannell of the Jehovah's Witnesses remarked to Forum 18. Twenty-four local Jehovah's Witness organisations and groups in Rostov region were sent a total of 28 virtually identical warnings, he said, 24 of which specifically ordered an end to extremist activity. Aware that an organisation may face court liquidation on receiving two such warnings, the Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Rostov Regional Public Prosecutor's Office, where they were told that it possessed specific information indicating that they conduct extremist activity, said Pannell. After consultation with federal officials, however, no further action has been taken against the Rostov congregations, he added.

Other than isolated incidents in Tambov Region and the republic of North Ossetia, religious extremism allegations against Jehovah's Witnesses appear confined to Rostov Region, Pannell told Forum 18. Although it succeeded in banning the Moscow religious organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses on other grounds in 2004, Moscow's Golovinsky District Court did not find them guilty of extremism (see F18News 25 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=327).

Asked for further details of its analysis of Jehovah's Witness material on 26 May, a spokesperson at the Rostov Centre for Court Studies told Forum 18 to contact the Regional Public Prosecutor's Office. A spokesperson at the Office's media relations department insisted that questions should be submitted by fax, which Forum 18 did on 26 May. There was no response by the end of the working day on 29 May.

Previously, rulings on alleged Islamic extremism have relied upon expert literary analyses which commonly confuse a justifiable definition of extremism in the 2002 Law – "propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens according to their attitude towards religion or religious affiliation" (Article 1) - with claiming the superiority of the religion itself. The freedom to make claims about the relative merits of religious or non-religious views is a central part of freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 20 April

2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=765). (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=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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