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RUSSIA: Nationwide strike at Jehovah's Witnesses

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Public prosecutors across Russia have conducted more than 500 check-ups on local Jehovah's Witness communities since mid-February. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service they believe prosecutors are "trawling" for information to shut down their headquarters in St Petersburg and over 400 dependent organisations. "Nothing else makes sense," their representative Yaroslav Sivulsky told Forum 18. Documents seen by Forum 18 show the nationwide sweep was ordered by First Assistant General Public Prosecutor Aleksandr Bastrykin. Forum 18 asked the General Prosecutor's Office in Moscow why the investigations were ordered and asked for a copy of the instruction to local prosecutors, but so far has received no response. In its instruction ordering check-ups locally, the Moscow Regional Public Prosecutor's Office complained that the Jehovah's Witnesses' missionary activity and rejection of military service and blood transfusions "provoke a negative attitude towards its activity from the population and traditional Russian confessions". Prosecutors have been investigating the St Petersburg Jehovah's Witness headquarters since 2004 but have failed to find any grounds to close it down.

In the space of just three weeks, Jehovah's Witness communities across Russia have undergone 500 state check-ups. "That's a conservative estimate – we're definitely talking the whole country," Yaroslav Sivulsky remarked to Forum 18 News Service from the Jehovah's Witnesses' St Petersburg headquarters on 10 March. "Our telephones here are red hot from people calling to report incidents and ask why it's happening."

The nationwide sweep, ordered by First Assistant General Public Prosecutor Aleksandr Bastrykin, is linked to an investigation into the Jehovah's Witnesses' St Petersburg headquarters, the Moscow Regional Public Prosecutor's Office explains in its order for check-ups sent to district subdivisions on 13 February.

Having failed to find grounds for prosecution since the St Petersburg investigation began in 2004, the authorities are now "trawling" for information to shut down the Jehovah's Witnesses' Russian headquarters and over 400 dependent organisations, Sivulsky believes: "Nothing else makes sense."

Jehovah's Witnesses' "missionary activity, social isolation, refusal to perform military service, accept blood transfusions and other religiously motivated restrictions required of members of this organisation provoke a negative attitude towards its activity from the population and traditional Russian confessions," the Moscow Regional Public Prosecutor's Office order notes.

Forum 18 has also viewed similar recent instructions for urgent check-ups on Jehovah's Witnesses issued by Sakhalin Regional, Udmurtia's Sarapul Municipal and Khabarovsk's Industrial District Public Prosecutor's Offices.

On 12 March Forum 18 asked the General Public Prosecutor's Office by fax when and why Bastrykin's order was issued, as well as for a copy of the document. A Press Department spokesperson promised a reply on 13 March after 3pm Moscow time. However, no response was received by the end of the working day. As of 13 March, the website of the General Public Prosecutor's Office made no mention of the order either.

"They are checking anything and everything that can be checked," Sivulsky told Forum 18. Moscow and Sakhalin Regional Public Prosecutor's Offices recommend co-ordinated check-ups involving the police, FSB security service and Justice Ministry departments in their orders.

Education departments appear to be following a particular line of investigation. A 9 February Mostovskoi (Krasnodar Region) District Education Department letter to local head teachers requests information by 5 March on "interference by religious - including Jehovah's Witness - organisations in the teaching process at educational institutions, enticement of minors into the activity of religious organisations without the knowledge of parents or guardians, cases of refusing blood transfusions or other treatment to minors, other violations of pupils' rights by members of and participants in religious organisations."

A 17 February letter from Kholmsk (Sakhalin Region) Municipal Education Department asks head teachers to respond to three questions by the following day: Does the Kholmsk Jehovah's Witness organisation conduct activity in educational institutions? Do any teachers belong to this organisation? What work is being done in institutions to prevent employees from being drawn into this

organisation?

An 18 February telegram from Stavropol Municipal Education Department asks head teachers for information by the following day on cases of "social isolation of followers of Jehovah's Witness teachings and refusal to study in connection with any bans or restrictions by this religious organisation." Also in Stavropol Region, a 17-year-old Jehovah's Witness pupil in the town of Izobilny reports on 24 February that his teacher was asked to compile a report about him for the local Education Department, including whether he has suicidal tendencies.

None of the check-up orders refer to extremism, Sivulsky of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Parallel attempts to prosecute individual Jehovah's Witness communities for distribution of allegedly extremist literature continue apace, however. Religious literature from other confessions has also been accused of extremism. Translations of the works of Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi have been banned in Russia following such claims by the authorities (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136).

On 25 February North Ossetia Public Prosecutor's Office filed suit with the local Supreme Court for the liquidation of the republic's four Jehovah's Witness organisations in Alagir, Beslan, Mozdok and Vladikavkaz. As well as distribution of allegedly extremist religious literature, the suit cites a number of grounds for the organisations' closure, including Jehovah's Witnesses' allegedly anti-constitutional refusal of blood transfusions and religious activity outside the geographical location where they are registered. It also notes that four Vladikavkaz Jehovah's Witnesses have refused to perform alternative military service - in one case resulting in a Soviet District Court sentence of 180 hours' forced labour - and that the husband of a member of the Beslan organisation has filed for divorce because she is a Jehovah's Witness.

A hearing at North Ossetia Supreme Court was slated for 12 March, but the Jehovah's Witnesses requested an alternative date because their lawyers were already due to appear in a similar extremism case in Salsk (Rostov-on-Don Region) on that day.

After participating in the 12 March Salsk hearing, New York-based Jehovah's Witness lawyer James Andrik told Forum 18 that the court is so far relying solely on the expert literary analysis of Jehovah's Witness literature by Rostov Centre for Court Studies as evidence (see F18News 14 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1159).

In a statement to Salsk Municipal Court, Andrik pointed out that in the Soviet Union "thousands of Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned or subject to other hardships and restrictions of their rights as a result of their religious activity, literature, and beliefs." While exonerated as victims of "unfounded repression" in 1996, however, Russian government representatives are now "poised to repeat the victimization of Jehovah's Witnesses," he maintains.

Thousands of kilometres apart, municipal courts in Salsk and Gorno-Altai (Altai Republic) both began determining whether Jehovah's Witness literature is extremist on 19 January (see F18News 16 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1241). The Gorno-Altai court has commissioned an expert literary analysis by linguists at Kemerovo State University. Court expert analyses of Jehovah's Witness literature in similar cases in Rostov-on-Don and Yekaterinburg are still ongoing, Sivulsky told Forum 18 (see F18News 14 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1159).

Under the 2002 Extremism Law, even a low-level court may rule literature extremist. It is then automatically added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials and banned throughout Russia. The List's 325 titles as of 13 March typically suggest extreme nationalist or antisemitic content. Most theological entries - the inclusion of which is also disputed - are Islamic (see most recently F18News 16 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1241).

While it succeeded in banning the Jehovah's Witnesses' Moscow local religious organisation on other grounds in 2004, the Russian capital's Golovinsky District Court failed to find it guilty of extremism (see F18News 25 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=327).

Officials in dozens of cities across Russia moved to block Jehovah's Witnesses' regional congresses last summer (see F18News 22 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1161). (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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