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RUSSIA: Back to the future for Jehovah's Witnesses?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Just weeks after Russia's Supreme Court outlawed their literature as extremist, Jehovah's Witnesses are encountering at least ten times the level of state harassment across the country as before the ban, their press secretary has estimated to Forum 18 News Service. Since 8 December, they have catalogued over 30 incidents, including searches, threats and brief detentions. So alarmed are the Jehovah's Witnesses by the growing similarity of their predicament with their repression during the Soviet period that their entire 160,000-strong Russian membership will today (26 February) begin distributing 12 million copies of "Is History Repeating Itself?", a leaflet refuting the religious extremism allegations against them. In December, Russia's Human Rights Ombudsman informed President Dmitry Medvedev of an upsurge in citizens' complaints about religious freedom violations, but his only response was to check if they came from "non-traditional" confessions. Mikhail Odintsov of the Ombudsman's Office declined to answer Forum 18's questions. Readers of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi – whose works are also banned - similarly note increased state scrutiny, with raids by the police and FSB security service on dozens of homes in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan and Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk in the past two months.

Just weeks after Russia's Supreme Court outlawed their literature as extremist, Jehovah's Witnesses are encountering at least ten times the level of state harassment across the country as before the ban, their press secretary has estimated to Forum 18 News Service. Local congregations are admittedly now more likely to report incidents such as brief police detentions, added Grigory Martynov on 22 February, but the Jehovah's Witnesses have become so alarmed by the growing similarity of their predicament with that during the Soviet period that their entire 160,000-strong Russian membership will today (26 February) begin distributing 12 million copies of "Is History Repeating Itself?", a leaflet refuting the religious extremism allegations against them.

Viewed by Forum 18, the leaflet points out that over 9,000 Jehovah's Witnesses were exiled to Siberia for their faith between 1949 and 1951, and that individual Jehovah's Witnesses such as Konstantin Skripchuk and five members of the Klimko family spent decades in prisons and labour camps before rehabilitation as "innocent victims of repression" in 1990. It fears that current branding of Jehovah's Witnesses as extremists "could trigger new persecution" and offers detailed objections to charges that Jehovah's Witnesses incite religious hatred, destroy families and refuse medical treatment. The leaflet will be distributed in town centres, shopping areas and at train stations across Russia from 26-28 February.

Readers of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi are similarly noting an upsurge in state scrutiny, with raids by the police and FSB security service on dozens of homes in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan and Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk in the past two months. Depending on the article of the Criminal Code invoked under the Extremism Law, those detained could face criminal charges carrying a prison term of up to five years (see most recently F18News 23 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1412).

Russian translations of Nursi's "Risale-i Nur" ("Messages of Light") were controversially banned as extremist by a Moscow court in May 2007 (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981) . "Nurdzhular" – which Nursi readers insist does not exist – was banned as an extremist organisation by the Supreme Court in April 2008 (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136). Countering the claims of Nursi critics in Russia that his work is banned in Turkey, a top Turkish religious affairs official stated in March 2007 that the 14 books of "Risale-i Nur" "do not pose any harm whatsoever from a religious and social point of view" (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400).

Published in Germany and the USA and widely distributed internationally, Russia's Supreme Court upheld a ban on 34 Jehovah's Witness titles as extremist on 8 December 2009 (see F18News 8 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1385). The Supreme Court of the Siberian republic of Altai upheld a similar ban on a further 18 items of Jehovah's Witness literature on 27 January (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400). None of these has yet been added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials, which runs to 490 titles as of 26 February. Under the Extremism Law, mass distribution, preparation or storage with the aim of mass distribution of the titles can result in Criminal Code Article 282 ("incitement of ethnic, racial or religious hatred") being invoked. This carries a penalty of up to five years in prison.

In a transcript of a conversation between President Dmitry Medvedev and Russia's Human Rights Ombudsman, Vladimir Lukin, posted on the president's weblog on 10 December 2009, Lukin raised the issue of religious freedom violations as well as those of other human rights. While Medvedev responded at some length to the other human rights violations mentioned, he asked only whether the significant increase in complaints about religious freedom violations came from "non-traditional" confessions. He also argued that the overall rise in appeals was "not bad" because it suggested that citizens had faith in their complaints being resolved.

Asked on 25 February whether Russia's Human Rights Ombudsman had received significantly more complaints from Jehovah's Witnesses in recent months, Mikhail Odintsov declined to comment to Forum 18.

The telephone of Aleksandr Kudryavtsev, secretary of the presidential Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations, went unanswered on 25 and 26 February.

Protesting against the mounting pressure on his community, Vasily Kalin, prisoner of conscience in 1983 and current head of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, had appealed to Medvedev as guarantor of Russia's 1993 Constitution to defend their rights and freedoms in November 2009. However, in what the Jehovah's Witnesses believe is an attempt to distance itself from the issue, the Presidential Administration's response stated only that this appeal had been referred to the Justice Ministry. The Justice Ministry's December response unequivocally supported state action against the Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 15 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1395).

Catalogue of detentions

In the longest detention of their members in connection with preaching in post-Soviet Russia, two Jehovah's Witnesses informally accused of distributing extremist literature in Bryansk Region received ten-day sentences in January for "petty hooliganism", but were released after six days due to their successful appeal (see F18News 15 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1395).

Usually, according to Jehovah's Witness press secretary Martynov, detentions last up to several hours, and police do not issue formal charges or other official documentation.

As recorded by the Jehovah's Witnesses, recent incidents of harassment involving state representatives are:

On 8 December 2009, Kirill Zinchenko and Yevgeny Shcheglov were detained by police in Spask-Demensk (Kaluga Region), asked for sample literature to check for extremism, and told to leave town. On 22 and 23 December they were again detained and questioned by police, threatened with being handcuffed and held in a police cell.

On 9 December police detained Jehovah's Witnesses in Nizhny Lomov (Penza Region) after visiting their home.

Also on 9 December, police searched the Kingdom Hall in Tulskey (Adygeya Republic) due to the Supreme Court ban and later asked for sample literature for examination.

Also on 9 December, police in Krasnooktyabrskiy (Adygeya Republic) visited the home of the local Jehovah's Witness congregation leader and asked to see its official documentation and religious literature before confiscating titles banned by the Supreme Court.

On 10 December, Vladimir Soluyanov and Andrei Yermolenko were searched and detained for over three hours by police while preaching in Chudovo (Novgorod Region).

Also on 10 December, Olga Kolosova and Anastasia Vdovina were asked by police whether they were distributing extremist literature as they preached in Mednogorsk (Orenburg Region).

Also on 10 December, Natalya Sandakova and Viktoria Filatova were detained, interrogated, photographed and fingerprinted by police in Saraktash (Orenburg Region).

Also on 10 December, Aleksandr and Viktoria Konev were detained and interrogated by a local Interior Ministry anti-extremism department in Magnitogorsk (Chelyabinsk Region).

On 11 December Jehovah's Witnesses reported police detentions in Kalininsk (Saratov Region).

Also on 11 December, Anzhela Barakova, a youth affairs inspector in Vladikavkaz (North Ossetia Republic), was told to resign because she was a "sectarian". She refused and was sacked.

On 13 December, police disrupted a worship service at the Kingdom Hall in Glazov (Udmurtia Republic) after being informed that a meeting of "sectarians" was taking place, and confiscated all literature in use. They then took the leader of the congregation, Dmitry Semenov, for questioning.

On 15 December, Valentin Goshokov, leader of the Jehovah's Witness congregation in Giaginskaya village (Adygeya Republic), was summoned for questioning at the local Public Prosecutor's Office, where he was asked about acquisition and distribution of literature. On 22 December he received an official extremism warning.

On 15 December, an FSB representative approached the head teacher of a Moscow school attended by Jehovah's Witness children and expressed displeasure that the local education authorities had not been informed about this fact, claiming such information is gathered from all schools.

On 19 December, police in Ust-Kalmanka village (Altai Region) detained Lyudmila Sosik as she preached, confiscating her religious literature. They had already visited her home and taken her for questioning in early December.

Also on 19 December, police searched two Kingdom Halls in Maikop (Adygeya Republic), in one case filming the search and commenting that the hall would make a good billiards hall and sauna. On 20 December, an assistant to Maikop's Public Prosecutor filmed a service at one of the Halls. On 21 December, Maikop Jehovah's Witness representatives were summoned by the local Interior Ministry anti-extremism department, questioned and issued an official extremism warning.

Also on 21 December, three law-enforcement personnel – one apparently from the FSB security service – interrogated two Jehovah's Witnesses working at a residential school in Yoshkar-Ola (Mari-El Republic) on how they became Jehovah's Witnesses and where they acquire and distribute literature. The pair were also asked for the personal details of elders of their congregation.

On 22 December, two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Aznakayevo (Tatarstan Republic) were detained by police. An FSB employee later joined in the interrogation, producing documents from the Altai trial.

Also on 22 December, Aleksei Stepanov was stopped by traffic police after collecting Jehovah's Witness literature from a courier. One officer filmed as two others opened and checked boxes, compared titles with a list of those banned – none of which were present – and requested details of its owner and destination.

On 25 December, two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Muzhukai were detained by police.

On 26 December, FSB representatives visited a local company storeroom in Tolyatti (Samara Region), where they checked - but did not confiscate - Jehovah's Witness literature.

On 28 December, the Public Prosecutor's Office in Volgodonsk (Rostov-on-Don Region) warned local Jehovah's Witnesses that it had identified cases of distribution of extremist literature.

Also on 28 December, Irina Korshundyants and Anushik Akobyan were detained, searched, photographed and fingerprinted while preaching in Novorossiisk (Krasnodar Region).

On 29 December, Yuri Shevchenko of the local Jehovah's Witness congregation in the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk was summoned to the local Interior Ministry anti-extremism department and issued an official extremism warning.

Also on 29 December, Yana Pankova and Tatyana Natfulina were detained while preaching in Novokuibyshevsk (Samara Region) on the grounds that they resembled suspected fraudsters. When the pair objected and requested their right to make a telephone call, they were told that such rights were granted only abroad, but not in Russia, and were photographed and fingerprinted.

On 30 December, Irina Maramzina and Nina Kedina were detained, photographed and fingerprinted while preaching in Vozhega village (Vologda Region).

Also on 30 December 2009, six Jehovah's Witnesses were detained, questioned, threatened, fingerprinted and photographed by police in Karaichevka (Voronezh Region); an FSB representative then compared their literature with a list of extremist titles and gave them a stern warning not to complain about their treatment by the police.

In early January 2010, two Jehovah's Witnesses who had previously been repeatedly detained were again detained by police in Rossosh (Voronezh Region).

On 4 January, eight Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Yelizavetinskaya village (Rostov-on-Don Region) were told by a local administration representative and Cossacks to "leave nicely" or else they would be whipped.

On 5 January, due to a complaint that they were distributing extremist literature, two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Barnaul (Altai Region) were detained by police, photographed, footprinted and told to stop preaching. (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.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287) and 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
[f18news @ editor.forum18.org](mailto:f18news@editor.forum18.org)

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY