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RUSSIA: Who initiated anti-Jehovah's Witness and anti-Nursi campaigns?

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

Despite many enquiries, Forum 18 News Service has been unable to establish which Russian government agency or individual initiated the campaign against the Jehovah's Witnesses and readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, and why. An Interior Ministry official – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 that "the police don't decide these things for themselves. Someone else has to give the order, perhaps a prosecutor. The police just carry out the order." The official insisted that the moves against Jehovah's Witnesses are "centralised", but declined to speculate on which agency or agencies were involved. The official ended the call before Forum 18 could ask about the campaign against Nursi readers. Contrary to this, Aleksandr Kudryavtsev of the presidential Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations rejected any suggestion of a "centralised" campaign. Jehovah's Witnesses have documented increasing numbers of short-term police detentions of their members.

Despite repeated enquiries, Forum 18 News Service has been unable to establish which Russian government agency or individual initiated the campaign against the Jehovah's Witnesses and readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, and why. Reached on 24 March, an official of the Press Office of the Interior Ministry in Moscow – who did not give his name – denied that local police would themselves have initiated actions against Jehovah's Witnesses. "The police don't decide these things for themselves," he told Forum 18. "Someone else has to give the order, perhaps a prosecutor. The police just carry out the order."

The official insisted that the moves against Jehovah's Witnesses are "centralised", pointing to the December 2009 Supreme Court ruling banning the distribution of 34 of their publications anywhere in Russia, but declined to speculate on which agency or agencies were involved. The official ended the call before Forum 18 could ask about the campaign against Nursi readers.

The Interior Ministry official referred Forum 18 to Dmitry Bolotov of the Interior Ministry's Department for Relations with Social Organisations (which include religious communities). However, reached the same day, he declined absolutely any comment. "Send a written enquiry to the Interior Ministry," he told Forum 18.

One Nursi reader who has faced harassment from the authorities said that officials have often told his fellow readers that moves against them have been ordered "from above". He suspects that such orders come not from local officials but from Moscow. "This is clearly one campaign, organised from above," the Nursi reader – who asked not to be identified – told Forum 18 on 24 March.

Nursi readers in Tatarstan, Dagestan and Krasnoyarsk are among those to have faced raids, literature confiscations and criminal charges (see most recently F18News 5 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1417).

"Centralised" campaign denied

Rejecting any suggestion of a "centralised" campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses and Nursi readers was Aleksandr Kudryavtsev, secretary of the presidential Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations. He insisted to Forum 18 from the Presidential Administration on 24 March that under Russian law, prosecutors and the courts are independent of the executive. "So there can't be any interference or influence. Perhaps prosecutors take action because of appeals from citizens." He then put the phone down.

In the space of three weeks in spring 2009, prosecutor's offices conducted more than 500 check-ups on Jehovah's Witness communities across Russia, looking for errors in their statutes, registration documents, records of decisions, and documents over use of buildings, as well as checking whether their activity was in accordance with their statutes. In the wake of the mass check-ups, Olga Shamshina, Deputy Head of the Department for Oversight over the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of Citizens at the General Prosecutor's Office in Moscow eventually insisted to Forum 18 that they were lawful and uncovered legal violations (see F18News 23 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1366).

Shamshina's telephone at the General Prosecutor's Office went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 24 and 25 March.

On 3 March, Forum 18 sought from the Justice Ministry clarification of the legal basis for seizing literature on the Federal List from

Jehovah's Witnesses, readers of the works of Said Nursi and others (see F18News 5 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1417). As of the middle of the working day in Moscow on 25 March, Forum 18 had received no response.

Jehovah's Witness detentions increasing

Since the December 2009 Supreme Court ban on many of the group's publications, numerous Jehovah's Witnesses across Russia face police detentions for up to several hours, usually without official documentation, as the community told Forum 18. They stated that there had been 29 similar incidents between 8 December 2009 and late February 2010 (see F18News 26 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1415). As recorded by the Jehovah's Witnesses, other recent incidents are:

On 27 January 2010, a Jehovah's Witness resigned from her job with the emergency services in Kursk after being encouraged to do so by a superior who asked whether she would leave the Jehovah's Witnesses or knew if they had been declared extremist.

On 1 February two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Uva (Udmurtia Republic) were detained and interrogated roughly by police.

On 3 February Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Dzerzhinsk (Nizhny Novgorod Region) were detained, interrogated, fingerprinted and photographed. Their literature was confiscated.

On 4 February a Jehovah's Witness was detained while preaching in Seryshevo (Amur Region).

Also on 4 February, a Jehovah's Witness preaching in Gubkin (Belgorod Region) was detained and accused of violating regional law by harassing citizens and imposing religious convictions.

On 6 February, three Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Kharovsk (Vologda Region) were detained by police and accused of violating Vologda regional law by "harassing citizens with the aim of religious agitation". Two other Jehovah's Witnesses were detained separately without explanation.

On 8 February, procuracy representatives visited the home of a Jehovah's Witness in the village of Altaiskoye (Altai Region) and summoned her for questioning. She was not permitted a lawyer or telephone consultation, and signed a statement under pressure.

Also on 8 February, two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained by police while preaching in Naberezhnyye Chelny (Tatarstan Republic). On 12 February, a police officer in the same city called at a Jehovah's Witness's home. On learning she was absent, he asked her husband whether she read religious literature and demanded what literature he saw in the flat. When the Jehovah's Witness returned, she was detained, interrogated roughly and issued a document confirming her "voluntary" submission of the literature, which she did not sign.

On 10 February two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained in Karachev (Bryansk Region).

Also on 10 February, two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Krasnoufimsk (Sverdlovsk Region) were detained, searched and had personal items confiscated by police, who explained they were suspected of inciting religious hatred.

On 10 February two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Chelyabinsk were detained and photographed by plain clothes police. Their literature was confiscated.

On 13 February two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained while preaching in Alatyr (Chuvashia Republic). Claiming they had banned literature, police threatened a criminal case against them and asked to see what publications they were carrying.

On 15 February a Jehovah's Witness was detained in Petrovsk (Saratov Region), asked about his local congregation's numbers and leadership and told to fetch its literature.

Also on 15 February, police detained, searched, fingerprinted and photographed a Jehovah's Witness preaching in Satka (Chelyabinsk Region). They later repeatedly visited his home.

On 17 February, two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Kirsanov (Tambov Region) were detained, fingerprinted and questioned by police, who also confiscated their religious literature after consulting a list of publications recognised as extremist.

Also on 17 February, law enforcement representatives arrived during worship at the Kingdom Hall in Gluboky (Rostov-on-Don Region) and demanded that it stop. The 14 Jehovah's Witnesses present were detained, questioned and told to stop holding services with reference to a supposed "presidential decree banning the Jehovah's Witness organisation in Russia".

On 18 February two Jehovah's Witnesses in Kinel (Samara Region) were detained, searched, fingerprinted and photographed while preaching.

Also on 18 February, two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained and questioned by police in Tambov.

Late evening on 22 February a procuracy official visited the home of a Jehovah's Witness in Penza and demanded information about his co-believers and their distribution of literature.

Also on 22 February, two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained by police while preaching in Tselina (Rostov-on-Don Region).

On 26 February, police summoned by a local Orthodox priest detained two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Aginskoye (Krasnoyarsk Region). At the police station, the priest signed a statement accusing the Jehovah's Witnesses of extremist activity.

On 3 March Jehovah's Witnesses Aleksei Komlyakov and Ramazan Magomedov were detained by local FSB while preaching in Khasavyurt (Dagestan Republic) and interrogated roughly for nearly seven hours. When Komlyakov pointed out that he was in a state institution and should have his rights respected, he was told cynically: "This is Khasavyurt!"

On 12 March a Jehovah's Witness driving on the main Moscow-Ryazan road was stopped by traffic police wishing to check for transportation of extremist literature. His car contained literature not on the Federal List, but he was nevertheless told to report to local police.

On 23 March, two Jehovah's Witnesses in Tambov preaching from door to door were forced to go to the police station without any written summons, where they were held for eight hours. Aleksei Zhdanov of Tambov police confirmed the detentions to Forum 18 the same day. A criminal case is already underway against Jehovah's Witnesses in Tambov (see F18News 22 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1424).

Protest leaflet distributors detained

Finding such treatment alarmingly reminiscent of Soviet-era repression, from 26-28 February the Jehovah's Witnesses' entire 160,000-strong Russian membership distributed 12 million copies of "Is History Repeating Itself?", a leaflet refuting the religious extremism allegations against them (see F18News 26 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1415). While distributing the leaflet on 26 February the following incidents occurred:

Two Jehovah's Witnesses, one a minor, were detained by police in Nizhny Novgorod. Despite attempts by the minor's father to enter the room, the minor was initially interrogated alone. When he refused to answer questions, he was told that documents confirming he had parents would be burnt and he would be sent to a children's home.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained, searched, fingerprinted and photographed in Omsk. Two other Jehovah's Witnesses were separately told by police to disperse.

A Jehovah's Witness in Unecha (Bryansk Region) was invited to the local police department by a passing police officer.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses in Prokhorovka (Belgorod Region) were detained by the local assistant head of administration and then at a local police station without explanation.

A Jehovah's Witness in Smolensk was detained, photographed and interrogated by police claiming that "distribution of such leaflets is illegal".

A Jehovah's Witness in Tselina (Rostov-on-Don Region) was detained and interrogated by police, who said they would refer the leaflet for expert analysis in order to conduct a search of her home in future.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses in Grachevka (Orenburg Region) were detained, fingerprinted, photographed and questioned by police.

A Jehovah's Witness in Alatyr (Chuvashia Republic) was detained on suspicion of distributing and storing extremist literature and threatened with imprisonment. She was interrogated roughly, photographed, searched and had literature confiscated.

Three Jehovah's Witnesses in Krasnoufimsk (Sverdlovsk Region) were detained by police; two were threatened with being handcuffed if they did not co-operate and told that their statements would be referred to the local anti-extremism department. Separately, another Jehovah's Witness was told by police to stop distribution.

Five Jehovah's Witnesses in Chernyanka (Belgorod Region) were detained and interrogated without explanation by police, who confiscated their supply of leaflets. Separately, a sixth was detained and roughly treated by an official of the District Public Prosecutor's Office, who confiscated her leaflets. On 3 March this last Jehovah's Witness was summoned to the Office and informed that an administrative case had been opened against her with reference to Belgorod Region's law on missionary activity.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses in Cherepovets (Vologda Region) were detained by police, who accused them of "harassing citizens with the aim of religious agitation". They were searched and had their religious literature confiscated.

Three Jehovah's Witnesses in Taganrog (Rostov-on-Don Region) were detained, questioned and photographed by police, who confiscated their leaflets.

A Jehovah's Witness in Talmenka (Altai Region) was detained, searched and questioned by police, who confiscated religious literature in his bag.

Two Jehovah's Witness in Chudovo (Novgorod Region) were detained, questioned and accused of violating the procedure for preparing and distributing mass media products (Article 13.21 of the Administrative Violations Code). Their literature was confiscated. A judge later asked for the case to be transferred to their locality of residence.

On 27 February further detentions of protest leaflet distributors happened:

Two Jehovah's Witnesses in Nizhny Novgorod were detained and questioned by an FSB officer and police, who claimed they were distributing extremist literature.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained by police in Chernyanka (Belgorod Region) and accused of violating the region's law on missionary activity.

Three Jehovah's Witnesses in Serafimovich (Volgograd Region) were accused of unlawful activity by an administration representative in the company of a Cossack ataman. Telling the Jehovah's Witnesses to stop their activity in the town, the state representative claimed not to be able to control local Cossacks, warning: "Either they'll set you alight in the summer, or else take you into the forest and do as they please with you. The Don [region] was always Orthodox, and we do not wish to tolerate any sects here."

In Kurgan two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained and interrogated by police.

In Ural (Khanty-Mansiysky Autonomous Region) a representative of the local municipal administration telephoned a Jehovah's Witness at home and demanded he stop distributing the leaflet. Forty minutes later three police officers entered his home without permission, checked his identification documents and summoned him to a local police station, where he was interrogated and again ordered to stop distributing the leaflet. He was released after a police officer from a separate department said that he had committed no crime.

In Vorotynets (Nizhny Novgorod Region) a Jehovah's Witness was detained and interrogated by police.

In Leningradskaya (Krasnodar Region) a Jehovah's Witness was summoned by police and told that the leaflet was extremist and banned him from distributing it.

In Penza two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained and questioned.

In Bui (Kostroma Region) two Jehovah's Witnesses, one disabled, were forced into a car by a man who later showed FSB identification. Detained at the local FSB headquarters and then by police, who drew up a document confiscating their literature, the pair were then taken to the local department of the Interior Ministry, where charges were drawn up against them for violating the regional Administrative Violations Code by "distributing brochures imposing their religious beliefs".

In Kupavna (Moscow Region) five Jehovah's Witnesses were detained and accused of distributing "religious-political leaflets".

On 2 March a Jehovah's Witness walking along a street in Ertel (Voronezh Region) encountered police officers who asked whether she had taken part in distribution of the protest leaflet on 28 February. When she said yes, she was asked to report to the police station with another Jehovah's Witness who had participated. When the pair reported and refused to answer the police's questions, they were accused of violating domestic registration regulations. (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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY