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RUSSIA: Congresses disrupted, website blocked

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Police and local officials who disrupted a Jehovah's Witness congress in southern Russia in July used cars, dustcarts and power cuts to prevent it from going ahead, before sealing off the building on alleged security grounds, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Other congresses elsewhere were disrupted or blocked. "Everywhere the pattern's the same," Jehovah's Witness Grigory Martynov told Forum 18. "The police seal the building saying they're looking for a suspicious item. When nothing is found, it doesn't matter – the main point is to disrupt the congress." Meanwhile, as part of a crackdown on websites with "extremist content", a court in the Russian far east has – for the first time - ordered an internet service provider to block local access to the Jehovah's Witnesses' Watchtower website. Other sites – including YouTube – have also been ordered blocked on prosecutors' suits, but Valentina Glazova of Khabarovsk Regional Prosecutor's Office denies that these represent censorship. "Our office supervises the implementation of the law," she told Forum 18. "Access to extremist material on websites should be blocked." As of 7 September, the Russian Federation had not challenged a European Court of Human Right ruling in favour of Moscow's Jehovah's Witness community, which becomes final on 10 September.

Disruption of a regional Jehovah's Witness congress in southern Russia in late July – including by two dustcarts – did not involve extremism allegations. But disruption of similar congresses in August was based on counterterrorism police accusations that extremist literature might be distributed, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Grigory Martynov told Forum 18 News Service. Meanwhile, for the first time in Russia, a court in the far eastern town of Komsomolsk-on-Amur has ordered a local internet service provider to block access to the international Jehovah's Witness website www.watchtower.org in addition to popular websites like YouTube. The court found that magazines posted in Russian on the Jehovah's Witness site "are directed at violating the integrity of the Russian Federation" and "incite social, racial and religious discord", according to the verdict seen by Forum 18.

A nationwide state campaign directed against Jehovah's Witnesses began in early 2009. The campaign intensified from 8 December 2009, when the Supreme Court upheld Rostov-on-Don Regional Court's earlier ruling outlawing 34 Jehovah's Witness titles as extremist and dissolving the local Jehovah's Witness religious organisation in Taganrog (see F18News 8 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1385).

Three criminal cases have already been opened against individual Jehovah's Witnesses in connection with alleged extremist activity, accusations Jehovah's Witnesses vigorously deny (see F18News 26 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1480).

Similarly the target of a nationwide campaign are readers of the works of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, many of whose works have also been placed on the Federal List of Extremist Materials.

The List, which runs to 694 titles as of 7 September 2010, contains items whose preparation, distribution or storage with the intent of distribution is banned across Russia.

On 18 August, Ilham Islamlı became the first Nursi reader in Russia to be convicted under the Criminal Code and punished under extremism-related charges when Nizhny Novgorod District Court sentenced him to ten months' detention, suspended for one year. He has chosen not to appeal against the sentence. Another Nursi reader in Dagestan, Ziyavdin Dapayev, faces a continuing criminal investigation (see F18News 26 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1480).

Police cars, dustcarts, electricity cut

Arriving for the three-day event at their Kingdom Hall in Nezlobnaya (Stavropol Region) on the morning of 23 July, some 2,000 Jehovah's Witnesses found police cars blocking entry to the building. Although the Hall had hosted a number of similarly large services in previous weeks, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the police attributed their action to the "criminal situation" in the North Caucasus republics from where many of the Witnesses had come.

After some five hours standing outside, they were permitted to enter the Kingdom Hall and begin worship, but local district vice-chair Svetlana Zhurakovskaya soon mounted the pastors' podium and demanded the microphone in order to interrupt the

service. Electricity to the building was then shut off, but the event continued thanks to an extra generator.

The following morning, some 200 Jehovah's Witnesses managed to enter the Kingdom Hall at approximately 6am, but entry was then blocked by two dustcarts, of which Forum 18 has seen a photograph. The building was later cordoned off by police, who found a bag with wires hanging out of it some distance beyond the perimeter fence while searching the site with dogs. As the premises were then evacuated, the Jehovah's Witnesses were finally forced to return to their hometowns at around 10am.

A 22 July order issued by Nezlobnaya village council, seen by Forum 18, bans all mass events in the village - including "religious congresses and conferences" - until 1 October 2010 due to a heightened risk of terrorism.

While terrorist attacks in Stavropol Region – bordering the restive North Caucasus - are rare, a car bomb did injure some 20 people in Pyatigorsk, close to Nezlobnaya, on 17 August. The terrorist threat may well be a pretext for the state's action, however, as Jehovah's Witnesses in the area have previously been singled out for restrictions.

History of congress obstruction

In nearby Nevinnomyssk, the municipal administration issued an order on 17 July 2009, seen by Forum 18, specifically banning worship services by Jehovah's Witnesses in the town on particular dates in July and August of that year. Going ahead with their 18-19 July congress anyway, the Jehovah's Witnesses managed to outwit police attempts to block entry to their Kingdom Hall by arriving before 6am on the first day and at 11am on the next (see F18News 23 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1366).

The July 2010 Nevinnomyssk congress also went ahead, but traffic police detained three minibuses of Jehovah's Witnesses travelling to it, seeking extremist literature (see F18News 27 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1470).

By 2004, Jehovah's Witnesses in southern Russia were restricted to holding congresses on their own property – such as Nezlobnaya Kingdom Hall – having been barred from public premises, particularly under pressure from local Cossacks (see F18News 29 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=464).

August congress disruptions

Disruption of this year's Jehovah's Witness congresses continued in mid-August, with events blocked in Bratsk and Tula, and disrupted in Irkutsk. "Everywhere the pattern's the same," Martynov of the Jehovah's Witnesses remarked to Forum 18. "The police seal the building saying they're looking for a suspicious item. When nothing is found, it doesn't matter – the main point is to disrupt the congress."

In Bratsk, Tula and elsewhere, counterextremism police have told local Jehovah's Witnesses informally that they were blocking the congresses because they had information that "extremist" literature would be distributed at them, Martynov told Forum 18.

Jehovah's Witness summer congresses have routinely faced disruption in previous years, from 2008 on a mass scale (see F18News 22 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1161)

Official who banned Baptist meetings rebuked

The Sosnovka District Prosecutor's Office in Tambov Region has rebuked the head of the Sosnovka village administration, Valery Toporkov, for illegally banning Baptist evangelistic concerts, according to a 9 August letter from Acting Prosecutor Svetlana Cheprasova, seen by Forum 18. She said he had failed to respond within the deadline for such notifications and that the administration "exceeded its powers" as it did not have the right to ban public events, merely to require changes in the way they are organised.

The Baptists notified the administration of the proposed outdoor concerts on 30 June in accordance with the law, but on 2 July Toporkov issued a written refusal. Despite negotiation with administration officials, Toporkov and other officials refused to change the decision and allow the concerts to go ahead. Police stood by on 9 July as a group of local people attacked the Baptists and drove them from the village (see F18News 26 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1469).

Pastor Vadim Mikhailin of Truth Baptist Church in Tambov welcomed the Prosecutor's Office rebuke to Toporkov, telling Forum 18 on 13 August that the decision recognised that the administration head had broken the law by banning their concerts.

First Russian blocking of Jehovah's Witness website

On 30 July, the internet service provider Technodesign in Komsomolsk-na-Amure blocked its customers' access to the official Jehovah's Witness international website www.watchtower.org, which contains information and publications in English, Russian and many other languages, according to an announcement on its website td-net.ru. Also blocked were four other sites, including a

far-right website.

The company was following the requirements of a 4 June ruling by Judge Yelena Buzynovskaya of Komsomolsk's Central District Court which came into force on 16 July. The decision was in response to a suit by the town prosecutor, Vitaly Pakhomov, to have access to the Jehovah's Witness site and the far-right site blocked as containing "extremist materials", according to the court website and court documents seen by Forum 18. The prosecutor noted that an investigation revealed that two Jehovah's Witness magazines "Watchtower" and "Awake!", of which some issues have been placed on the Federal List, appear on the site.

The court found that the presence on the far-right website of Hitler's "Mein Kampf", as well as the issues of the Jehovah's Witness magazines on the Watchtower site, "are directed at violating the integrity of the Russian Federation, undermine state security, incite social, racial and religious discord, provokes animosity towards the way of life and culture of citizens of Russian ethnicity, undermine the foundations of national security of the Russian Federation, and violate the constitutional rights of citizens".

Most elements in this accusation are or closely resemble phrases from the 2002 Extremism Law. However, "provokes animosity towards the way of life and culture of citizens of Russian ethnicity" appears to originate with the suit brought by Ingushetia Republic Public Prosecutor's Office to block the Ingushetiya.ru political opposition website in 2008. The phrase was also used by the city court of Nyagan (Khanty-Mansiisk Autonomous Okrug) in a ruling blocking access to several websites on the Federal List, the court's website reported on 12 March 2010.

On 30 August, Technodesign lodged an appeal against the 4 June ruling ordering it to block the Jehovah's Witness site, the Central District Court told Forum 18 on 7 September. The appeal will be heard in Khabarovsk Regional Court.

Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 on 6 September that neither of the two US entities which publish their works and run their website were notified of the court proceedings, nor were they given a copy of the court decision. "This is the first time we have suffered such a block on any of our sites in Russia," they added.

Four days after the block was ordered on the Jehovah's Witness site, the same court issued another ruling ordering the company to block five other sites, including YouTube and Zhurnal.ru, which also contained works deemed extremist by Russian courts. Similar rulings were issued against two other local providers soon afterwards in the wake of similar suits by prosecutor Pakhomov.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Pakhomov on 6 and 7 September.

A document apparently from Khabarovsk Regional Prosecutor's Office, published on the priamurka.ru website on 1 September, indicates that it has been working together with the Regional Police and Roskomnadzor to study the extent of the availability of "extremist materials" – including Jehovah's Witness texts and "Mein Kampf" - on websites accessible locally. It asked local prosecutors in four locations – including Komsomolsk-na-Amure – to find out if local people can access these sites, discovering that seven internet service providers offered such access. The document said 21 suits against internet service providers had been lodged in the region to block such access.

Valentina Glazova, spokesperson for Khabarovsk Regional Prosecutor's Office, believed that the suit against Technodesign was one of three against local providers specifically related to the Watchtower site. Asked if further such suits could be expected, she declined to speculate. "Our response is still being formed," she told Forum 18 on 7 September.

Glazova denied that these suits represented censorship. "Our office supervises the implementation of the law," she insisted. "Access to extremist material on websites should be blocked." She said her Office had received an instruction to conduct the survey of local internet access, but declined to say who had issued the instruction and whether it came from Moscow.

No appeal so far on Strasbourg ruling

On 10 September the 10 June 2010 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg in favour of the Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow becomes final, unless either side appeals. The ruling states that the 2004 ban on the Moscow Jehovah's Witness community was unlawful (see F18News 12 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1466).

So far, neither of the parties has appealed, the ECtHR Press Unit told Forum 18 on 7 September. (END)

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).

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, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

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.

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>.

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