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RUSSIA: Kaliningrad Muslim "extremist" ?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Amir Abuev, a resident of Russia's Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, is the latest Muslim to face a criminal case on "extremism"-related charges, after an 11 February FSB security service raid on his flat where local Muslims had gathered to pray the namaz (prayers). Participants told Forum 18 News Service they were questioned all night, while Abuev – a reader of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi - was detained for about 48 hours. Abuev's friends expressed concern that he – like other Muslims who read Nursi's works – could be imprisoned on "fabricated charges". FSB officers told the media Abuev belongs to the banned Nurdzhular movement. Like other Muslims who read Nursi's works, Abuev denied to Forum 18 that such a movement exists. The FSB security service investigator leading the case, Lieutenant Artyom Voychenko, declined to discuss the case. "I won't give you any information," he told Forum 18. The FSB security service also confiscated all Abuev's literature and DVDs with religious material in an illegal way.

Amir Abuev, a resident of Russia's Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, became the latest Muslim to face a criminal case on "extremism"-related charges after an 11 February FSB security service raid on his flat where local Muslims had gathered to pray the namaz (prayers). Participants told Forum 18 News Service they were questioned all night, while Abuev – a reader of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi - was detained for about 48 hours. Abuev's friends expressed concern that he – like other Muslims who read Nursi's works – could be imprisoned on "fabricated charges". FSB officers told the media Abuev belongs to the banned Nurdzhular movement. Like other Muslims who read Nursi's works, Abuev denied to Forum 18 that such a movement exists.

The FSB security service investigator leading the case, Lieutenant Artyom Voychenko, admitted that he had taken part in the 11 February raid, but added: "It wasn't only me." However, he declined to discuss the case. "I won't give you any information," he told Forum 18 from Kaliningrad on 29 February. "You should address our leadership and they will give out information if they consider it necessary."

The duty officer at the Kaliningrad Region FSB refused to comment on 15 February, referring Forum 18 to its Press Service. The same day a Press Service officer, who gave his name only as Aleksandr, refused to discuss Abuev's case by telephone, asking Forum 18 to send its questions in writing. Despite asking in writing on 15 February why the FSB security service appears to believe Abuev and his friends are dangerous, and whether gathering for religious purposes in a private home is illegal, Forum 18 had not received a response by the end of the working day on 29 February.

Many Muslims who read the works of Said Nursi have faced criminal cases in Russia in recent years. Four had their criminal case closed on 24 February at a court in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk as the deadline of two years for completing a case had run out. However, other "extremism" criminal cases continue against people exercising their freedom of religion or belief. For example on 27 February the prosecution completed its case in the trial of a Jehovah's Witness husband and wife, Andrei and Lyutsiya Raitin, in the Siberian city of Chita (see F18News 5 March 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1675).

Kaliningrad FSB security service raid

The 31-year-old Amir Abuev, who prefers the first name Amin, was born in Khasavyurt in Dagestan in Russia's North Caucasus. He studied in the town's madrassa (Islamic religious school). He came to Kaliningrad Region during his military service in 1999, and settled there again in 2005.

Trouble began for Abuev on the evening of 11 February, while he and seven fellow Muslims had gathered in his Kaliningrad flat to pray the night namaz (prayers). At about 8.30 pm, as prayers were about to start, there was a knock on the door and "suspecting nothing" the guests opened the door. "Then an armed and masked group of 12 to 15 people stormed in, knocking Amin off his feet," his friends told Forum 18. Abuev was in shock, his friends noted, and initially thought his flat had been attacked by bandits. "Learning that these were FSB security service officers, he even calmed down a little."

The intruders behaved "extremely crudely", the Muslims complained, shouting at them to lie on the floor and addressing Abuev "as if he were a terrorist". FSB officers then called in FSB investigator Voychenko and the official witnesses.

They handcuffed Abuev while they conducted an eight-hour search, which lasted until 5 am the following morning. "All this time, Amin and his guests repeatedly asked if they – even one by one – could pray four farzes of the night namaz. But in reply the guardians of order clutched their weapons and issued threats."

The FSB security service officers seized all Abuev's literature, several hundred books, as well as his laptop computer and two mobile phones. Only several days later did the FSB hand over a list of confiscated items. "This should have been presented on the spot, but they used the fact that I didn't know the law," Abuev told Forum 18 on 28 February.

Such unlawful confiscations have also happened in other raids against Nursi readers and Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 5 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1417).

All those present were then taken to the FSB headquarters in Kaliningrad and interrogated individually, one of them told Forum 18. All but Abuev were freed at 7 am. Abuev told Forum 18 that while in detention he was questioned by FSB officers.

Another of those present also had his home searched in his absence at the same time. "I allowed my wife to let them in as they threatened to break down the door," the Muslim told Forum 18. "There they seized a lot of literature from my library and took my wife's computer."

Court refuses detention request

At 4 pm on 13 February, two days after the raid, Abuev was taken to Kaliningrad's Central District Court as the FSB security service sought an order to have him held in pre-trial detention. However, Judge Lyudmila Sagy rejected the FSB request, the Judge's Assistant Valeriya Permilovskaya told Forum 18 from the court on 1 March. She declined to discuss the reasoning behind the decision, adding that the Judge would not be able to discuss this either.

"The court was presented with no evidence that I would run away or put pressure on other witnesses", Abuev told Forum 18. "The investigator was shocked – he wanted me detained."

After the hearing he was returned to the FSB station, where questioning continued. He was released that evening, about 48 hours after the FSB launched the raid on his flat.

Abuev said FSB investigator Voychenko summoned him again for questioning on 16 February. Once there, he was required to sign a statement that he would not leave Kaliningrad. Abuev said it is unclear how long the investigation will last and when any case might be brought to trial.

Was Abuev dismissed as Deputy Imam?

Abuev told Forum 18 he had been Deputy Imam and Deputy Head of the Department for Links with Social Organisations of the Kaliningrad Muslim Organisation, until the community dismissed him at the time of the raid. He added that it was the FSB which told him that he had been dismissed.

"Controversy has emerged over the building of a mosque in Kaliningrad and perhaps the leadership didn't want my case to interfere," Abuev told Forum 18. "But community members were surprised at the decision. They wish to defend me."

However, the head of the Kaliningrad Muslim Organisation, Irshad Khisanov, insisted to Forum 18 that Abuev had not held the formal position of Deputy Imam. "He led prayers when the Imam was away, but any educated man who knows the prayers and the Koran could do so," he told Forum 18 from Kaliningrad on 1 March. He said no state agencies had contacted him about Abuev.

Khisanov added that some years ago the Organisation intended to create a Department for Links with Social Organisations. But this department had never been set up.

Khisanov insisted that Abuev's activity "doesn't affect our organisation". He added that he had heard that Abuev read Nursi's works, "but we study the Koran. Our organisation follows what is allowed in the country where we live, not what is forbidden."

"His flat is always open to all"

Abuev's friends note his long-standing connections with the local Muslim community, saying "his flat is always open to all", and Muslims often gather there to pray the namaz together. They insist he retains cordial relations with people of other faiths and has visited churches at priests' invitations. They said he met Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church during one of his visits to Kaliningrad Region, giving him copies of Nursi's books and a biography of him.

FSB charges

The Kaliningrad Region FSB security service told local news agencies on 14 February that a case had been launched against Abuev, under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity").

Article 282.2, which was changed in December 2011 to add a forced labour punishment possibility, is the usual choice of prosecutors seeking to punish Muslim readers of Nursi's works exercising their freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 12 January 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1654).

The FSB told news agencies that it had confiscated "a large quantity" of religious books in Russian and Turkish – including some on the Federal List of Extremist Materials – as well as religious DVDs "with agitational recordings". FSB officers accused Abuev of knowingly being a member of the "Nurdzhular" movement which had been banned by Russia's Supreme Court in April 2008. Nursi readers deny that this movement exists (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136).

Muslims insist that "Nurdzhular" does not exist. Defenders of state action against Nursi readers routinely claim that his works are banned in Turkey, but this is not so (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400). Readers of Nursi's works have also been linked in the Russian media with the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which claim Muslims have vehemently denied (see F18News 13 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1562).

The FSB security service did not name Abuev, but identified him as a Dagestan-born local resident. "The group he led undertook attempts to distribute in the Region, including in educational establishments and prisons, the ideas of fundamentalist Islam in the interpretation of Said Nursi, the chief Turkish ideologist of this movement," the FSB told local news agencies.

"Extremist" ?

Kaliningrad's Muslim community wrote to Moscow City Court in May 2007 after the capital's Koptevo District Court had ruled the Russian translation of Nursi's collection *Risale-i Nur* (Messages of Light) "extremist". The community called on the Court to adopt a "just decision". However, it upheld the ban (see F18News 13 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1061).

The ban on Russian translations of Nursi's works – originally imposed in May 2007- relies solely upon analysis of the work by psychologists and linguists of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Russia's Ombudsman for Human Rights, Vladimir Lukin, and a wide range of Russia's Muslim leaders and scholars condemned the ban (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

Prior to the ban, on 9 August 2001 Talgat Tadzhuiddin signed a statement on behalf of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia. The statement said Nursi's collection *Risale-i Nur* "represents exclusively scholarly commentaries on the Koran, serving knowledge of the revelation of the Supreme Creator". It added that the works "are far from religious extremism and fanaticism".

Numerous lower court decisions have found – on highly questionable grounds – that Russian translations of the Islamic theological works of Said Nursi and Jehovah's Witness publications are "extremist" and so placed them on the Justice Ministry's Federal List of Extremist Materials (see "The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?" F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288). Anyone distributing works on the list or storing them with the intention of distributing them is liable to criminal prosecution (see eg. F18News 21 June 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1582).

Such lower court literature decisions are of great help to officials seeking to prosecute Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of Nursi's works for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. A total of 68 Jehovah's Witness publications, as well as 15 Russian translations of Nursi's works, have already been ruled "extremist".

An attempt to find a key Hare Krishna book, the *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*, "extremist" failed in court in Tomsk in December 2011 (see F18News 5 January 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1652). However, Tomsk Prosecutors have challenged this ruling, and their appeal is due to begin at Tomsk Regional Court on the afternoon of 20 March 2012, the court website notes.

Numerous criminal cases

Since the ban numerous Muslims who read Nursi's work have faced criminal prosecution in recent years on accusations that they belong to an "extremist" organisation. Jehovah's Witnesses have also faced criminal prosecution in recent years on accusations that they distribute "extremist" religious literature

One such Nursi reader, Asylzhan Kelmukhambetov, was freed from prison in Orenburg on appeal on 19 January after serving seven months of his 18-month prison term (see F18News 20 January 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1658). (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.ucoz.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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

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