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RUSSIA: Is mass disruption to Jehovah's Witness congresses coordinated?

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The authorities have prevented about eight Jehovah's Witness congresses from taking place so far this summer while about thirty have gone ahead despite official attempts to obstruct them, Marina Topuriya of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service. The FSB security service, local administrations and Prosecutor's Offices have all been involved. Congresses in Kemerovo and Kirov due to have begun on 25 July are the latest to be abruptly cancelled. "We suspect it's co-ordinated, because everywhere the methods are the same," she noted. "It's difficult to say where the wind is blowing from. But we can see the results." The FSB security service in Moscow refused to discuss with Forum 18 their role in the cancellations, but an officer in Vladikavkaz denied that the FSB had obstructed the local Jehovah's Witness congress. A pending legal case in Sverdlovsk Region could see many Jehovah's Witness books and magazines – including "Watchtower" – declared extremist and banned. Acting Public Prosecutor Aleksei Almayev denied that this was a "witch hunt" and dismissed Jehovah's Witness fears that the magazine could be banned in its entirety. Religious freedom lawyer Anatoli Pchelintsev shares the Jehovah's Witnesses' concerns. "I feel [the authorities] want to close down the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, though of course they physically couldn't do this."

Officials in dozens of cities across Russia are moving to try to block Jehovah's Witnesses' regional summer congresses, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Four such events set for 18-20 July alone faced disruption and pressure to close them down. "We've seen nothing like this before," lawyer Marina Topuriya of the organisation's St Petersburg headquarters told Forum 18 on 22 July. "We suspect it's co-ordinated, because everywhere the methods are the same." However, she declined to speculate who might have taken the decision to launch such a coordinated campaign. "It's difficult to say where the wind is blowing from. But we can see the results."

Jehovah's Witnesses say obstruction and pressure to cancel the congresses came from the Federal Security Service (FSB), local administrations, the local police and the Prosecutor's Office. "There's a ladder, but when things happen so fast it's clear it comes from the top," Topuriya told Forum 18.

Anatoli Pchelintsev of the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, which has taken up many religious freedom cases, notes that while other religious communities face obstruction from the authorities, the Jehovah's Witnesses currently face the most serious problems. "The attempts to obstruct their congresses and ban their literature could be coordinated, though I have no proof," he told Forum 18 from Moscow on 22 July. "I believe the law-enforcement agencies are behind it. I feel they want to close down the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, though of course they physically couldn't do this."

Pchelintsev pointed out that the reasons officials have given in some places for cancelling the Jehovah's Witness congresses – particularly accusations that they have violated the 2004 Demonstrations Law – are not legally valid. "The Demonstrations Law doesn't cover religious events," he told Forum 18. "In law religious organisations don't have to inform anyone that they're holding a meeting – they can just rent premises and go ahead. If they're renting a stadium, it is sensible to tell the police so that they can manage security, but they don't have to."

Given the reported involvement in many of the incidents of the FSB, Forum 18 tried to find out if it had coordinated the actions. However, an official of its Public Relations Department in Moscow declined to give any information. "I won't give you any comment," the official – who refused to give his name – told Forum 18 from Moscow on 22 July. "I won't help you." He then put the phone down.

In Russia as elsewhere, numerous Jehovah's Witness congregations come together for a special programme of religious instruction at annual congresses. Topuriya reported that as of 22 July, some eight congresses had been prevented from taking place, while some 30 had gone ahead with difficulty. "Of these, six or seven faced serious obstruction. They even obstruct congresses held on our own property." She said she feared that the forty or so more that are due to take place might be obstructed.

Topuriya said the latest congresses to be obstructed were due to have begun in Kemerovo in south-western Siberia and Kirov (Kirov Region) on 25 July. "Agreements had been signed to rent premises in both cities, but the directors then cancelled, apparently under

pressure," she told Forum 18. "When our people started to book buses to take our members to the venues, moves started and the directors quickly cancelled."

Topuriya said that because of the growing difficulties, the Jehovah's Witnesses have been forced to organise the events as quietly as possible to try to prevent the authorities finding out. "We're forced to be cautious," she explained. "In Kemerovo they approached a Jehovah's Witness trying to find out from her when and where the congress was to take place. She immediately understood and didn't say." Topuriya insists that the authorities listen in to telephone calls to try to find out.

In the Urals city of Yekaterinburg, the municipal authorities issued a decree banning the gathering on the grounds that it violates the 2004 Demonstrations Law, Topuriya told Forum 18. Like Pchelintsev, the Jehovah's Witnesses insist that religious events held on private premises do not come under the 2004 Law. They point to Article 16, part 2 of the 1997 Religion Law, which says that worship meetings can be held without obstruction in premises made available to religious organisations.

Speaking from Yekaterinburg on 18 July, Jehovah's Witness press officer Yaroslav Sivulsky said that the first day of the congress had gone ahead at Uralmash Stadium with approximately 4,000 participants despite visits from police and other local state representatives, who maintained that they should have informed the authorities 20 days in advance under the Demonstrations Law. However, Article 7, part 1 of this law requires notice of between 10 and 15 days. "This is just sloppiness on their part – they don't know the law," Sivulsky complained.

The lawyer Pchelintsev agrees. "The Demonstrations Law nowhere demands 20 days' notice," he told Forum 18.

Separately, FSB security service officers acting under the auspices of Asbest Interdistrict Investigation Section of Sverdlovsk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office raided the Jehovah's Witnesses' local kingdom hall in Yekaterinburg on the morning of 16 July, Sivulsky told Forum 18. "They confiscated a great deal of literature – one copy of everything from the library," he reported. Books and journals were taken as part of a local investigation into their allegedly extremist content (see F18News 14 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1159).

The duty officer at the Sverdlovsk Region FSB and a colleague to whom he directed the enquiry – neither of whom would give their names – refused to discuss the 16 July Yekaterinburg raid with Forum 18 on 22 July.

Asbest's acting Public Prosecutor Aleksei Almayev defended the FSB seizure of the literature but denied that it had been a raid. "It was a search and the literature was taken as part of the investigation," he told Forum 18 on 22 July. "They just took one or two copies of each publication. There was so much literature that there were not enough staff to take it all."

Almayev also defended the investigation into the Jehovah's Witness literature. "It's not a witch hunt." He said it was launched after complaints from "citizens of the Russian Federation". Asked who had complained, he responded: "Catholics, Orthodox, Buddhists and Muslims – they all believe their rights have been harmed by this literature."

While several Jehovah's Witness magazines, including "Watchtower", are among the publications being investigated, Almayev insisted that no court has the right to ban an entire magazine. "The court would determine that a concrete article in a concrete issue of a concrete magazine had violated the law," he maintained. "Of course they can't ban the whole publication."

Yet this is precisely what Sivulsky fears. "It's not logical from a legal point of view, but we're afraid that they'll ban all issues of our journals, not just individual articles or individual issues," he told Forum 18. The lawyer Pchelintsev agrees. "The Jehovah's Witnesses are right to be worried. The court could deem the whole publication extremist under the Extremism Law and then anyone distributing it would face prison and the religious organisation itself could be closed down."

Numerous Muslim works have been placed on the Federal List of Extremist Materials after courts found them to be "extremist", often with no specific proof being cited (see F18News 17 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1160).

The local authorities in the northern port of Murmansk are also insisting that the Jehovah's Witnesses should have notified the mayor, police and emergency services 20 days before their 18 to 20 July congress. Viewed by Forum 18, a 7 July letter from the city's October District Administration maintains that this is required according to a 5 December 2006 decision on public meetings by Murmansk City Council. October District received the Jehovah's Witnesses' notification on 7 July, 11 days before the event. Their congress nevertheless went ahead at the city's Central Trades Union Stadium.

In May 2007 the Jehovah's Witnesses were refused permission to build a kingdom hall in a Murmansk suburb, Regnum news agency reported.

In the Siberian city of Irkutsk, the Jehovah's Witnesses began their congress at Labour Stadium on 18 July despite warnings by visiting local officials that it was in violation of a local public prosecutor's office injunction, according to Sivulsky. "They asked why we were holding the event despite the ban, but as we had a valid contract before it was issued, we will follow that," he told Forum 18. Prior to the congress, the Prosecutor's Office wrote to the stadium director and warned of a possible fine, the Jehovah's Witness

press officer added.

In Nizhny Novgorod, 2,000 Jehovah's Witnesses convened at premises belonging to one of their members, Topuriya told Forum 18. On 19 July the FSB detained some of the community and queried the presence of children at the event, she said, but the congress went ahead nevertheless.

Two congresses set for 11-13 July were also beset by difficulties. In the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, a holiday camp director backed out of an agreement shortly before Jehovah's Witnesses were due to meet, citing police pressure, Topuriya told Forum 18. The event went ahead elsewhere.

In the Urals city of Perm, it is unclear whether a congress originally scheduled for 11-13 July will take place later. A local public prosecutor insisted that the Jehovah's Witnesses should have notified the local authorities at least 20 days beforehand in accordance with the 2004 Demonstration Law, according to Topuriya.

For the first time, the Jehovah's Witnesses' federal body could not hold a congress in Moscow, Sivulsky told Forum 18. Despite support from the city authorities, Luzhniki Stadium refused to lease its premises on 4-6 July "due to some sort of pressure," he said. Some 30,000 participants were due to attend the event, which in summer 2007 was held at the same stadium.

The Russian capital's Golovinsky District Court banned the Jehovah's Witnesses' Moscow local religious organisation in 2004 (see F18News 25 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=327).

In the southern city of Volgograd, police and public prosecutor representatives tried to prevent a 5-6 July congress but backed off when the Jehovah's Witnesses pointed out their legal rights, Sivulsky told Forum 18.

In the north-eastern European cities of Izhevsk and Kirov, local Jehovah's Witnesses were unexpectedly unable to secure rented premises for their congresses, Sivulsky told Forum 18. Never having been refused previously in Izhevsk, "this time they couldn't get any rental agreement anywhere," he explained. "Last year the police came and shut off the water and electricity, but we managed to continue at a sports arena outside town."

In the North Caucasus city of Vladikavkaz, the local FSB told the director of the Manezh centre where the Jehovah's Witnesses intended to hold their congress to agree to lease the premises but to cancel the agreement the day before the event, which he did, Sivulsky maintained to Forum 18. He said the Manezh centre – the biggest sports hall in the city - had been happy to rent the premises to them in earlier years.

The operational duty officer of the North Ossetian FSB in Vladikavkaz – who refused to give his name - denied that the FSB had been involved in cancelling any religious event. "According to the law the FSB doesn't obstruct the activity of religious organisations," he told Forum 18 from the city on 22 July. Told that the Jehovah's Witnesses insist that the FSB had been behind the sudden cancellation of the rental agreement, the duty officer responded: "This is a delusion. I don't know why they think that."

Sivulsky pointed out that officials have been repeatedly conducting "check-ups" – such as tax inspections - on the Jehovah's Witness headquarters in St Petersburg since 2004. "They've been looking for reasons to close down the headquarters," he told Forum 18.

In 2003 police stopped Jehovah's Witnesses from holding three congresses in the southern Stavropol Region (see F18News 29 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=464). They were forced to abandon their congress in Yekaterinburg in 2004 (see F18News 27 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=377). In 2005, the authorities blocked congresses in Yekaterinburg and Arkhangelsk, and disrupted events in Orenburg and Ivanovo Region (see F18News 16 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=630).

Although there were a couple of attempts to disrupt them, all 53 planned congresses went ahead in Russia during summer 2007, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported. (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=947.

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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