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RUSSIA: How the battle with "religious extremism" began

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

The formation of Russia's policy towards one particular form of extremism – religious extremism – may have begun hesitantly, Forum 18 News Service notes. But the June 2002 Extremism Law eventually led to a wideranging crackdown on religious literature the authorities deemed "extremist", as this analysis – the first part of a presentation given at a seminar at the Kennan Institute in Washington DC – notes. In late 2002, literature confiscated from a mosque community in an FSB security service and Prosecutor's Office raid led to the first known warning for religious literature under the Law. Yet convictions – often handed down in secret and based on literary analyses of confiscated books – soon mounted. Mainstream Muslim works – such as Russian translations of the writings of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi – were banned outright, even though they contain no calls to commit crimes. A typical expert analysis suggested that Nursi's work – banned by a Moscow court in 2007 – is extremist because its reference to "the sword of strong faith" might lead to "defensive behaviour".

As with many governments, the catalyst for Russia's decision to get serious about "religious extremism" was the coordinated attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001. Before then occasional attacks within Russia, such as the September 1999 apartment bombings in Moscow, were seen as overspill from the localised conflict in Chechnya and the product of separatism rather than any religious ideology. One illustration of how little attention was paid to defining "religious extremism" came as late as March 2002, at a conference for regional civil servants dealing with religious affairs. When a senior government official announced preparations for a new law against extremism, someone from the floor asked him what the nearest native Russian equivalent term for "ekstremizm" would be. At a loss and rather red-faced, he suggested "violence".

A few months later, in June 2002, a law entitled "On Fighting Extremist Activity" was passed. Usually known as the Extremism Law, it gave a lengthy and basically sound definition of extremism. Four clauses define extremist activity in a specifically religious context: incitement of religious hatred; committing a crime motivated by religious hatred; obstruction of the lawful activity of religious associations accompanied by violence or the threat of violence; propaganda of the exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens according to their attitude towards religion or religious affiliation.

Attempts to prosecute religious extremism did not follow immediately. The first Forum 18 encountered was in Yekaterinburg in summer 2004. Ruslan Nurmametov, a serious young Muslim belonging to a local mosque community called Rakhman, recounted how FSB security service officers and officials from the local Public Prosecutor's Office turned up during a Rakhman prayer meeting in late 2002, checked identification papers and confiscated a number of books in Russian. In 2004 a couple of them – "The Personality of a Muslim" and "The Fortress of a Muslim" – were still openly on sale at a kiosk next to Yekaterinburg railway station.

Following the raid, Rakhman and its parent Muslim spiritual directorate were issued an official warning under the Extremism Law. Under the law, two warnings in the course of a year are sufficient for a court to dissolve an organisation. The Public Prosecutor's Office then commissioned an expert analysis of the books seized from Rakhman. This was conducted by two academics from Maksim Gorky Urals State University – one a former scientific atheism lecturer, Vladimir Viktorov, who features in future cases. In their analysis, these academics took one of the general definitions of extremism in the 2002 Law – "belittling national dignity" – and argued that the books "belittle the national identity of Christians", but the case against Rakhman was later dropped for lack of evidence.

The next development came on 14 February 2003, when a closed session of Russia's Supreme Court banned 15 organisations as terrorist. Most of these are clearly violent – al Qaeda and the Taliban are among them – but the ban also included a borderline group, Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a loose international movement which does not accept existing Muslim nations to be truly Islamic and supports the idea of a single Islamic state, or Caliphate. It advocates serious restrictions on human rights, and claims to be entirely peaceful. Yet in 2002, Hizb ut-Tahrir issued a strongly antisemitic statement apparently calling for Jews anywhere to be killed, which resulted in a ban in Germany and a prosecution in Denmark. This statement is not well-known in Russia, but it would have been enough to ban the group there under the Extremism Law. Instead, the Supreme Court chose a different route. In its verdict, it reasoned that Hizb ut-Tahrir is terrorist simply because its adherents aim to revive the Caliphate and are "working to create a schism in society".

Following the school siege in Beslan in North Ossetia in September 2004, mass trials of alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members began, in part for religious extremism. Among these, Tobolsk City Court's prosecution of five Muslims in October 2005 is particularly notable. These five were given prison sentences ranging up to six years. Their convictions rested not on proven participation in terrorist acts, but solely on literary evidence.

The court's sessions were closed, but Forum 18 managed to obtain a copy of the religious studies section of an expert analysis of literature allegedly confiscated from the five suspects. This was again conducted by Vladimir Viktorov of Maksim Gorky Urals State University, who argued the literature to be extremist because it "propagandises the idea of the superiority of Islam - and therefore Muslims - over other religions and the people who adhere to them". Here he is clearly confusing a justifiable definition of extremism in the 2002 Law – "propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens according to their attitude towards religion or religious affiliation" (Article 1) - with claiming the superiority of the religion itself. The freedom to make claims about the relative merits of religious or non-religious views is a central part of freedom of religion or belief. The same confusion between claiming the superiority of particular people and claiming the superiority of particular views is made in every attempt to ban allegedly religious extremist literature in Russia with which Forum 18 is familiar.

By 2005, similar allegations were being levelled against less marginal Muslims. Charges of extremism against Mansur Shangareyev claimed that, "actively adhering to a radical trend of Islam, differing from traditional Islam by preaching the superiority of the given trend," he moved to Astrakhan Region "in order to realise his criminal intent." Specifically, he "began to make remarks to Muslim girls about their immodest dress without having any right to do so" and "spoke negatively about burial rites, maintaining that Muslims should not perform funerals or commemorate the dead in any way".

With a local imam, Shangareyev was also alleged to have begun "to invite Hindus and immigrants from the Caucasus propagandising radical Islam (..) who wore untrimmed long beards and socks tucked into their trousers, and attempted with their help to instil the ideals of radical Islam into the villagers, particularly young people."

This case also highlights some of the procedural concerns typically raised by those accused of religious extremism. When Shangareyev was finally sentenced to three years' internal exile, it was actually for possession of several militant Islamic leaflets and a video, 20g of marijuana and a hand-grenade, all of which he claimed were planted. His lawyer Vladimir Ryakhovsky reported that the police search of Shangareyev's home lasted for nine hours, but only a few minutes – showing the discovery of the marijuana and grenade in a coat pocket and felt boot – were filmed. This clearly begs the question: How did the police know in the course of those nine hours when to switch on their camcorder?

Over the past two years, the authorities' attention has turned to even less contentious Muslim literature. In May 2007 a district court in Moscow banned the Russian translation of "Risale-i Nur" (Messages of Light), a 14-part commentary on the Koran by Said Nursi. Nursi, who died in 1960, was a Turkish theologian imprisoned under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk due to his vehement criticism of what he saw as the negative social effects of state atheism, but his works are freely available in Turkey today. The Moscow court ruled that Nursi's work "aims to incite religious hatred, propagandise the exclusivity, superiority and inferiority of citizens according to their attitude towards religion" and is therefore extremist.

The ban relies solely on literary analysis by psychologists and linguists from the Russian Academy of Sciences. As cited in the court's verdict, these experts concluded that "Risale-i Nur" "attempts to influence the psyche of the reader subconsciously, using mechanisms of religious belief, i.e. the formation of conscious values and convictions with an irrational basis". The sessions of this court were also closed, so it is not known upon which parts of Nursi's text the experts were basing their conclusions. However, some idea emerges from an unsuccessful attempt to ban the work in 2006 by Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office, which subsequently instigated the Moscow ban.

In the expert analysis for the aborted Tatarstan case, local psychologists and psychiatrists argued that Nursi's reference to a prophecy about Jesus' Second Coming as the fulfilment of sharia law "discredits the religious value of Christianity as a religion". They also interpreted Nursi's reference to "the sword of strong faith" as "a concept of opposition and war which could lead to defensive behaviour".

Unusually, there was strong, high-level criticism of the crackdown on Nursi's writings, but it failed to prevent the ban. Commenting on the 2006 expert analysis, one of Russia's two main Muslim organisations, the Council of Muftis, pointed out that in the Soviet period, "when any religion was declared 'a remnant of the past' (..) atheist psychiatrists described the very same mechanisms of religious influence upon the psyche." Just before the ban, Russia's Ombudsperson for Human Rights, Vladimir Lukin, declared that Nursi's work is in no way extremist and warned, "We must avoid a repeat of the prohibitions and persecutions of those with dissenting views and faiths that are characteristic of undemocratic, totalitarian states."

Sergei Sychev, the lawyer who fought the Moscow ban, suggested after the verdict that the situation for Nursi readers in Tatarstan "already smells like 1937". Alsu Khusayenova, one of some 50 women in Naberezhnyye Chelny in Tatarstan who have a home group which studies Nursi's works, has explained to Forum 18 why. She recounted that on the morning of 12 July 2005, local FSB security service officers and representatives of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office raided four flats belonging to group members in Naberezhnyye Chelny and a further five addresses in Kazan. Alsu was present at one of the raids in Naberezhnyye Chelny; she said

the state representatives forced their way in and refused to produce a search warrant or remove their shoes. They seized books, personal notes and photos while the apartment block was surrounded and a police helicopter flew overhead.

A few months later, in December 2005, five of the study group were summoned for questioning by the FSB in Kazan. While they were told this would last 15 minutes, the women were subjected to a five-hour interrogation by psychiatrists and psychologists. One of the women later described how she was asked in detail about her life, to comment on drawings representing concepts such as fear, love and death, and answer questions such as "Who and what made you accept this belief in God?" and "Who are your enemies?" She said the seemingly endless tests and questions adversely affected her health.

Afterwards the FSB kept phoning and visiting the women's homes and workplaces until they signed documents saying they had consented to the tests. Similar incidents continued into 2006; in August of that year another member of the Nursi home study group was escorted from her workplace to a psychiatric hospital, where she had to answer dozens of questions in quick succession, including about her relationship with her husband and how she reprimands her children.

When Forum 18 contacted a spokesperson for Tatarstan FSB about this situation, he denied there had been any abuse. Valeri Kuzmin of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office similarly defended the state's actions. When asked about the searches involving the FSB and a helicopter, he said their aim was to find Nursi literature. Forum 18 pointed out that the searches happened before any expert analysis of the literature had determined it to be extremist, and asked how he could have known in advance that such aggressive search methods might be necessary. His answer was: 'Well, we needed to get hold of the literature in order to conduct the expert analysis, right?'

- This is an adapted version of the first part of a seminar presentation given at the Kennan Institute, Washington DC, on 14 April 2009. For the second part, "The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?", see F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288. (END)

For 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, 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.

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>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY