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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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RUSSIA: Notorious "anti-cultists" on new "Inquisition"

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

Fears by religious minorities about the Justice Ministry's reconstituted Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis have been exacerbated by the Minister's choice of members, Forum 18 News Service notes. The chair is Aleksandr Dvorkin, Russia's most prominent "anti-cult" activist, who has described the faith of charismatic Protestants as "a crude magical-occult system with elements of psychological manipulation". In a Moscow courtroom in 2004, Forum 18 observed Dvorkin congratulate the Public Prosecutor's Office representative who successfully pushed for the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses' Moscow organisation. Fellow Council member Aleksandr Kuzmin wrote a leaflet alleging that "Krishnaites are involved in the drugs and arms trade" and "are prepared to murder on religious grounds", and that "beatings and rapes of teenagers in closed children's homes are attributed to Krishnaites." A Siberian court declared the leaflet extremist in March 2009. Another Council member has urged Muslims to burn Islamic books banned as extremist. Forum 18 asked the Justice Ministry whether Council members will have the right to speak for the Ministry and whether Kuzmin will be excluded from the Council. The Ministry has not yet responded.

If given free rein, the new members of a government body empowered to scrutinise religious activity are likely to recommend harsh measures against certain confessions, Forum 18 News Service notes. One appointee is the author of a leaflet linking Hare Krishna devotees with murder and child abuse that was recently declared extremist by a Siberian court. Another has urged Muslims to burn Islamic books banned as extremist – even as prominent Muslim leaders press for a review of such rulings.

Orders signed by Justice Minister Aleksandr Konovalov on 18 February and 3 March 2009 appointed 24 members – all but one new – to the Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis. The orders also gave it wide-ranging powers, allowing it to investigate the activity, doctrines, leadership decisions, literature and worship of any registered religious organisation and recommend action to the Ministry (see F18News 26 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1299).

If heard, one check on the Council's activity may be the unprecedented outcry the development has provoked from a range of Russia's religious representatives – Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, Muslim, Old Believer and Pentecostal – and religious-freedom defenders. Some have likened the body to a new "inquisition" (see F18News 2 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1303).

Forum 18 submitted written questions to the Justice Ministry before the start of the working day on 22 May. These included: whether the Council's new members have the right to make statements on behalf of the Ministry; whether Aleksandr Kuzmin will be excluded from the Council as the author of a leaflet ruled extremist by a court in the Russian Far East. However, the Ministry failed to respond to Forum 18's questions by the middle of the working day in Moscow on 27 May.

Justice Minister Konovalov rebuffed criticism of the Council as "incompetent and improper" and "unacceptable pressure on the mechanism of partnership taking shape between state and society," the Russian news agency Interfax reported on 21 April. He insisted his Ministry had created the Council in strict conformity with current laws, that adequate control mechanisms would limit its competency and that its decisions were only recommendatory.

Konovalov also defended his decision by sending his greetings to a 15-16 May St Petersburg conference on "totalitarian sects". This featured several new Council members, including its chair, Aleksandr Dvorkin, Yevgeny Mukhtarov and Aleksandr Kuzmin, who spoke on "The Neo-Pentecostal Threat to Russia's State Security", the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice reported.

Dvorkin's attacks on religious minorities

Aleksandr Dvorkin - Russia's most prominent "anti-cult" activist - heads the St Irenaeus of Lyons Religious-Studies Research Centre, which is also a missionary faculty department of St Tikhon's Orthodox University in Moscow. The Centre's website lists numerous "sects and cults", of which the most familiar and established in Russia include: charismatic Protestants (termed "neo-Pentecostals" by Dvorkin and his supporters), Hare Krishna devotees, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church, commonly known as the Mormons) and the New Apostolic Church. It also lists non-religious formations well-known internationally, such as Amway enterprises and Steiner-Waldorf schools.

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Among Dvorkin's many attacks on such groups is his conclusion to a paper on "Neo-Pentecostalism in Russia", delivered at an April 2001 conference on "Totalitarian Sects – Threat of the 21st Century" in Nizhny Novgorod. He describes the faith of charismatic Protestants as, "a crude magical-occult system with elements of psychological manipulation (..) an anti-Biblical teaching furthering the personal enrichment of its pastors and the dissemination of false teachings originating in pagan cults."

As soon as Moscow's Golovinsky District Court pronounced its verdict banning the Jehovah's Witnesses' Moscow organisation in May 2004, Forum 18 observed Dvorkin warmly congratulate the Public Prosecutor's Office representative who had pressed for the ban. In an interview shortly after his new appointment broadcast on Radonezh, a Moscow-based Orthodox radio station, he accused Adventists of using deception.

Are other Expert Council members impartial?

During the Radonezh interview, Dvorkin and interviewer Aleksandr Shchipkov - also now a Council member - agreed they had little experience in its new activity. As well as doubts about the Council's impartiality, lack of qualification in religious-studies scholarship is among Russian critics' concerns (see F18News 2 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1303).

Also known as the Russian Association of Centres for the Study of Religion and Sects, Dvorkin's Centre has branches in over a dozen Russian cities, some of which are missionary departments of Orthodox dioceses. The Saratov branch is headed by Aleksandr Kuzmin.

On 26 March 2009 Khabarovsk Central Municipal Court ruled a leaflet authored by Kuzmin extremist material. Young Guard, the youth movement of the pro-government United Russia political party, reported on 28 July 2008 that its local branch distributed the leaflet earlier that month at a festival of Indian culture organised by Hare Krishna devotees in Khabarovsk. This announcement – which included the text of the leaflet – has been removed from Young Guard's website in recent weeks. The leaflet alleged that "Krishnaites are involved in the drugs and arms trade in Russia and abroad. Krishnaites are prepared to murder on religious grounds (..) beatings and rapes of teenagers in closed children's homes are attributed to Krishnaites."

On 5 May Kuzmin's Saratov Centre issued an open letter – still on its website – to Saratov residents condemning "Feel the Force of Change", a campaign promoting Christian social activism organised by local Protestant Churches. The letter attacks one participant in particular, Word of Life Pentecostal Church, as "a horribly destructive sect. In Russia there were cases of beatings and murder of children in this sect in the guise of exorcism."

Another new Council member, Yevgeny Mukhtarov heads the Yaroslavl branch of Dvorkin's Association. In addition to groups identified by Dvorkin, its website lists Adventists, Baha'is, Baptists and the Salvation Army among "non-traditional cults" in Yaroslavl Region.

Other new Council members whose impartiality is particularly in doubt include Orthodox priest Fr Lev Semenov, who teaches at Dvorkin's Centre, and Vladimir Belov, who heads the Centre of Orthodox Culture and Religious Anthropology at Saratov University.

Russian Muslims' concerns

The Council's two vice-chairs, Roman Silantyev and Valiulla Yakupov - who were elected at its first meeting on 3 April - are of concern to many Russian Muslims.

Silantyev's book on Islam in modern Russia treats followers of the moderate Turkish theologian, Said Nursi, as dangerous extremists. Nursi's books have already been banned through the courts as "extremist" and included on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Anyone who then distributes them is liable to be fined (see F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

At a hearing in Russia's Public Chamber on 3 March which questioned bans on Islamic literature - including Nursi's works - Silantyev countered that the state authorities were working in the right direction. He also remarked, "Let's ban all books published in Saudi Arabia, everyone knows that Russia has bad relations with the USA, so we should ban books from countries that are in the American orbit."

Until recently an imam in the traditionally Muslim republic of Tatarstan, Yakupov told the Russian newspaper Kommersant on 4 March that, despite Muslim protests against such bans, it was "better to destroy such literature now". (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.

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Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism&quot 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.

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