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RUSSIA: More "extremist" books to be banned?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In two separate cases Russia's FSB security service in Kostroma Region, north-east of the capital Moscow, and Prosecutors in Primorskiy Territory, on the Pacific west of Sakhalin Island, have confiscated religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has learned. In Primorskiye the Jehovah's Witness who had the literature has been fined, but it is unclear whether the Muslim in Kostroma will be fined. In both cases the literature has been sent for "expert analysis" to see if it should be declared "extremist" and banned throughout Russia. The FSB claimed in relation to the "voluntary" handover of works by Muslim theologian Said Nursi in Kostroma that it had conducted "warning/prophylactic measures among individuals inclined towards carrying out crimes of extremist orientation". Asked by Forum 18 what these "crimes" were, the FSB stated that "they were not planning explosions or murders" and would not elaborate more.

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"Voluntary" handover In Kostroma?

Kostroma Region FSB security service announced on 26 July that it had conducted "warning/prophylactic measures among individuals inclined towards carrying out crimes of extremist orientation". It said that as a result of such measures, a woman living in Kostroma had "voluntarily" given a hundred books and booklets by Muslim theologian Said Nursi in Russian, Turkish and English to the FSB. It said four of the items are on the Federal List after being banned by a court. "The rest of the literature will be sent for special investigation of whether the texts contain signs of extremism," the FSB stated.

A spokesperson for Kostroma Region FSB, Yelena Shilova, declined to answer specific questions about the operation. "We can't unveil details of operational work," she told Forum 18 from Kostroma on 27 July. She declined to say when the measures had taken place or to identify the woman or say what would happen to her.

Asked the type of crimes such individuals were "inclined" to conduct, Shilova responded: "They were not planning explosions or murders." She declined to reveal how the FSB security service had identified those "inclined towards" carrying out "extremist" crimes.

Asked whether the woman had been frightened into handing over the books, Shilova responded: "We didn't say she was afraid." Shilova refused to explain why the books not found to be on the Federal List had not been immediately returned to her, nor to explain what will happen to those that are on the list.

Kostroma FSB's January seizures

It remains unclear if this is the same incident, or a related incident, to one reported by Kostroma Region FSB on 19 January. It announced then that it had confiscated 480 copies of publications by Nursi in Russian, English, Turkish, Arabic and Tatar from a female resident of Kostroma. It said 98 copies of 15 different publications were already on the Federal List. It added that copies of the 57 other different publications were being sent for investigation.

Muslim readers of Nursi's works told Forum 18 that in the winter of 2011-2, officials who refused to say which agency they were from repeatedly visited a resident of Kostroma asking her to hand over the key of a flat she was looking after. When they extracted the key from her they immediately seized all the literature they could find. "The woman was very afraid," Muslim readers of Nursi's works told Forum 18. "But if officials had had a search warrant, they wouldn't have forced her to open up the flat – they'd just have forced their way in. It's very convenient to be able to talk of 'voluntarily' handing books over."

Extensive Federal List of banned books

More than 1,300 individual works have been declared "extremist" by courts in different parts of Russia and placed on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. In many cases the rationale for bans is highly questionable, as the List for example includes works that argue for peace and respect for human rights. Analysis by "experts" arbitrarily chosen by the FSB or Prosecutors is the first step before works are taken to a local court for a banning decision. If it agrees that a work is "extremist", the court informs the Justice Ministry in Moscow which then adds the work to the Federal List. Distributing or storing the work with the intention of distribution then becomes a crime throughout all of Russia (see Forum 18's survey of religious freedom violations related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724).

Prosecutors and the FSB have actively targeted works by the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi and Jehovah's Witness publications, and have attempted but failed to ban a key text for Hare Krishna devotees. A court in Orenburg banned more than 65 Muslim texts in a 20 minute hearing, which has sparked protests and appeals from across Russia. These are due to be heard for the first time on 6 August (see F18News 30 July 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1726).

Primorskiy confiscation, "analysis", and fine

Meanwhile, in the town of Spassk-Dalny in Primorskiy Territory, Jehovah's Witness publications have been sent for "psychological/linguistic analysis" to see if they should be banned, an aide to local prosecutor Roman Prokudin stated on 1 July. He said that the results would determine whether prosecutors will bring a banning suit to court. Prokudin made the remarks in a statement sent to local news website gorodok-su.ru.

The works sent for "analysis" were among religious literature confiscated from the head of the town's Jehovah's Witness community Yuri Vasilchenko. Other confiscated works were already on the Federal List.

On 24 April, a Magistrate at Judicial Unit No. 59 in Spassk-Dalny found Vasilchenko guilty of "Production or distribution of extremist materials" under the Code of Administrative Offences Article 20.29, the Judicial Unit website notes. He was fined 3,000 Roubles (about 560 Norwegian Kroner, 75 Euros, or 95 US Dollars).

Seizures of religious literature from both Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses, mostly during raids or detentions, frequently result in prosecutions under Article 20.29. This punishes "Production or distribution of extremist materials" recorded on the Federal List of Extremist Materials with a fine or imprisonment of up to 15 days and confiscation of the banned literature. Under this Article, the "mass distribution" of items on the Federal List, as well as their "production or possession for the purposes of mass distribution" is banned. Despite the term "mass distribution", prosecutors have often brought charges even if only one copy of a text is discovered. Court decisions usually order "extremist" materials to be confiscated and often destroyed (see Forum 18's "Extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1724).

The telephone of Yelena Telegina, senior aide at Primorskiy Regional Prosecutor's Office in Vladivostok went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 31 July. Reached the same day, the telephone of the Prosecutor's Office in Spassk-Dalny was switched to a fax machine.

Negative statements

Prosecutors issued a press release on 1 July asserting Vasilchenko's guilt in "storing religious literature recognised as extremist with the aim of its mass distribution". His role as head of the local Jehovah's Witness community was stressed. Such comments were repeated in a 30 July press release on the Primorskiy Territory Prosecutor's Office website. Similar comments asserting the danger of Jehovah's Witnesses were made by officials after the 4 May conviction and fine under Article 20.29 of Shmavon Bagdasaryan in Bashkortostan in the Urals (see F18News 19 June 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1713).

Both the Primorskiy press statements note that "the Prosecutor issued a warning to the chair of the committee of the Jehovah's Witness religious organisation of the town of Spassk-Dalny [Vasilchenko] on the basis of Article 7 of the Anti-Extremism Law of the unacceptability of carrying out extremist activity".

Jehovah's Witnesses have frequently complained to Forum 18 that local officials often make statements, widely picked up in the local and national media, which give a negative impression of groups and people exercising the right to religious freedom.

For example, on 30 July at the opening of criminal cases against 10 Jehovah's Witnesses in Chuvashia, the Investigation Committee claimed that the ten were: "suspects, positioning themselves as supporters of the Jehovah's Witness organisation, follow the aim of spreading their world views which are based on the rejection and critique of traditional cultural, moral and religious values" with the aim of inciting hatred and discord between themselves and "those professing other religions" (see F18News 31 July 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1727). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's

Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

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.

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.

More 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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