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RUSSIA: What's the matter with Said Nursi?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The reasons for Russia's ongoing nationwide campaign against readers of Islamic theologian Said Nursi have remained obscure, Forum 18 News Service notes. The state has offered weak or no explanations for banning as "extremist" 39 Nursi works and an alleged associate organisation, "Nurdzhular", which Nursi readers deny exists. Much of the state's argumentation is incoherent, with quite different reasons offered for banning Nursi writings and "Nurdzhular" in different contexts. Court materials seen by Forum 18 contain no evidence that either Nursi's writings or Muslims who read them advocate violence, despite claims to the contrary by officials. However, since the anti-Nursi campaign became apparent in 2005, clear patterns are emerging in the types of "evidence" offered. Considered together, these suggest that the campaign's primary cause is state opposition to "foreign" Turkish and American spiritual and cultural influence. Officials and others who support the bans have pointed to this in their public statements. But as this is not a criminal offence, weak allegations of "extremism" are instead offered in a legal context.

Russia's 2002 Extremism Law spotlighted one group of Muslims previously little known: readers of Islamic theologian Said Nursi. Yet the reasons for the ongoing nationwide campaign against them have remained obscure, Forum 18 News Service notes.

The state has offered weak or no explanations for banning as "extremist" 39 Nursi works and an alleged associate organisation, "Nurdzhular", which Nursi readers deny exists. Forum 18 finds much of the state's argumentation incoherent, with quite different reasons offered for banning Nursi writings and "Nurdzhular" in different contexts. Court materials seen by Forum 18 contain no evidence that either Nursi's writings or Muslims who read them advocate violence, despite claims to the contrary by officials and others who support the bans.

More than eight years since Russia's anti-Nursi campaign became apparent in 2005, however, clear patterns are emerging in the types of "evidence" offered. Considered together, these suggest to Forum 18 that the campaign's primary cause is state opposition to "foreign" spiritual and cultural influence. Officials and others who support the bans have pointed to this in their public statements. But as attempts at such influence are not a criminal offence – peaceful advocacy of a spiritual or other worldview being a fundamental human right – weak allegations of "extremism" are instead offered in a legal context.

Campaign

From a Sufi background in Turkey, Said Nursi (1876-1960) attempted to integrate Islamic and modern scientific thought. Known for biting opposition to the social consequences of atheist ideology, he once wrote to the Vatican suggesting that Muslims and Christians should join forces against it. While Nursi spent many years in internal exile and prison under the rigidly secularist regime of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, his works are now freely read in Turkey.

As of 5 March 2013, Russia had banned 39 of Nursi's works as "extremist". In April 2008 the Supreme Court additionally banned "Nurdzhular" (a russification of "Nurcular", Turkish for "Nursi followers") as an "extremist" organisation at the request of the General Prosecutor's Office. Nursi readers deny they form part of any such organisation (see Forum 18's Russia "Extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724).

To date, five Nursi readers have received prison terms of up to 18 months as alleged members of "Nurdzhular"; five more have received suspended prison sentences (see F18News 6 June 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1709).

Some Russian regional officials are now stepping up their campaign against Nursi readers. Courts in Kaliningrad, Krasnoyarsk and St Petersburg have ruled 18 Nursi works "extremist" in recent months, and two Nursi readers stand accused of organising "extremist" activity following armed raids in the traditionally Muslim republic of Tatarstan on 14 February (see F18News 19 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1803).

In the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, two imams are on trial as alleged organisers of "Nurdzhular" (see F18News 27 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1807).

Officials now routinely equate readership of Nursi with membership of "Nurdzhular". Yet Forum 18 finds no connection between

the few reasons offered by courts for banning Nursi literature and broader state allegations regarding "Nurdzhular". In both cases, evidence is weak or unsubstantiated. The current Novosibirsk trial offers typical examples of this (see F18News 28 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1808).

Russia has similarly banned as "extremist" numerous Jehovah's Witness texts, as well as the local Jehovah's Witness organisation in the Black Sea coast town of Taganrog. A court in the Siberian city of Tomsk tried unsuccessfully to ban as "extremist" a key text for Hare Krishna devotees in 2011. In these cases, however, the root cause is more obvious: theologically based hostility from within the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), shared by some government officials (see Forum 18's Russia "Extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724).

Obscure reasons

Asked by Forum 18 on 5 March why the General Prosecutor's Office had initiated prosecution of alleged members of "Nurdzhular", a spokesperson at the Office's press service insisted that questions be submitted by fax.

Forum 18 earlier faxed questions to the Office's press service in July 2009, asking why moves were underway in various parts of the Russia against those who study Nursi's works (see F18News 16 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1328). Forum 18 did not receive a response.

The state's justification for banning Nursi literature partly emerges in corresponding court rulings, however. The May 2007 decision to ban 14 Nursi titles by Moscow's Koptevo District Court, for example, agreed with "expert" testimony that the works' ideas "are based upon the conviction of the superiority of a religious way of life" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

The September 2010 decision to ban a further Nursi title by Krasnoyarsk's Railway District Court similarly agreed with separate "expert" testimony that the work instils in the reader "the exclusivity of the Islamic religious faith, which is presented as the true faith" (see F18News 29 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1504).

As with previous contentious judgments on "extremist" religious literature in Russia, both courts thus confused propaganda of exclusivity or superiority of particular people due to their attitude towards religion – justifiably defined as extremism by the Extremism Law – with claiming the superiority of a particular belief. 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 (see F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287).

It remains largely unclear what precisely the courts found "extremist", however, as verdicts rarely quote Nursi directly. The Krasnoyarsk court decision gives as one example Nursi's view that people who do not believe in Islam are "frivolous", "philosophers" and "empty-talkers". It also shares the concern of "expert" analysts over "militarist metaphors, which inevitably dispose the reader towards perceiving reality through the prism of a military camp situation" (see F18News 29 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1504). The decision gives no example here, but the relevant December 2008 analysis suggests that a reader might – among other interpretations – understand the following Nursi passage as a call to arms: "The army of the Eternal King, consisting of tribes of angels, genies, people and dumb animals and plants, in battle for the preservation of life, having received a Divine order: 'Make ready weapons and instruments, for defence!'"

Moscow's Koptevo District Court did not quote from Nursi at all in its verdict, and its sessions were closed. It is therefore not known which Nursi passages gave rise to the "expert" conclusions affirming "extremism" that formed the basis of the court's decision (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981). However, some idea emerges from an unsuccessful 2006 attempt to ban the same texts by Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office, which subsequently initiated the Koptevo case.

In 2005 Tatarstan officials began harassing a group of 50 women who study Nursi's works. Group members told Forum 18 that flats were raided and searched, often without a warrant, books and notes confiscated and several of the women subjected to forced psychiatric examinations (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=992).

As cited in a 2006 critique by the Council of Muftis of Russia, the "expert" analysis for the aborted Tatarstan case 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". The analysis also interpreted Nursi's metaphor "the sword of strong faith" as "a concept of opposition and war which could lead to defensive behaviour" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

Forum 18 notes that these few examples of non-specific language are the strongest evidence of "extremism" that Russian courts have managed to find in Nursi's work. Yet some in Russia – such as Vasily Ivanov of the state-backed Russian Institute for Strategic Studies at a January 2013 round table in Tatarstan – continue to claim that Nursi's writings "call for violence towards non-believers".

Strikingly, a state-commissioned June 2012 analysis for the ongoing Novosibirsk case failed to uncover "extremist" elements in the eight Nursi titles it considered. This was even though the same titles – in three cases, identical editions – had previously been ruled

"extremist" (see F18News 28 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1808).

The lack of clarity on what precisely "extremism" is did not stop Volgograd's Central District Court from ruling on 22 January 2013 that disagreement with designations of "extremism" is in itself "extremist". Amongst evidence used in deciding that two unspecified foreign websites were "extremism", the Court included "techniques forming the notion that the works of Nursi do not contain religious extremist ideas" (see F18News 19 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1803).

Broad opposition

Also pointing to the weakness of the state's claims against Nursi's works are objections from a variety of public figures, including representatives of major Russian Muslim organisations.

In August 2001 Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin pronounced Nursi's Koranic commentary "Risale-i Nur" – 14 parts of which were banned by the Koptevo ruling - to be "far from religious extremism and fanaticism". "These works and the people who read them aim to bring to all who wish the eternal truths of Goodness and Faith in One Creator," the mufti remarked, "they absolutely do not contain calls to violence, ethnic or interreligious discord, to undermine the foundations of society or the state."

Leading Mufti Ravil Gainutdin likewise insisted in December 2004 that Nursi's works are "far from incitement of any form of discord or ill-will".

In April 2008 Nizhny Novgorod Muftiate's website published a list of 150 Muslim representatives and scholars - both inside and outside Russia - who have defended Nursi's works. In addition to Tadzhuiddin and Gainutdin, they included Mukaddas Bibarsov of Saratov Muftiate; Rafik Mukhametshin, rector of Kazan's Russian Islamic University in Tatarstan; Ali-Vyacheslav Polosin of the Council of Muftis of Russia; and Marat Saifutdinov, editor-in-chief of Islam.ru website.

In May 2007 Russia's Ombudsperson for Human Rights, Vladimir Lukin, declared of "Risale-i Nur": "No form of opposition to citizens due to their choice of worldview (religious or non-religious) is contained in the books and brochures, still less calls for religious hatred and intolerance" (see F18News 5 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1811).

In traditionally Muslim areas where Nursi is well known, some local Muslim and even state representatives have also defended the theologian's work. In Tatarstan's capital Kazan, Renat Valiullin, head of the republic's Council for Religious Affairs, expressed doubt to Forum 18 in a June 2009 interview about the Koptevo Court ban on Nursi literature: "The decision was made without any strong expert analysis (...) on the basis of linguistic or other examinations (...) professionals weren't working on it" (see F18News 16 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1328).

In Dagestan's capital Makhachkala, "we don't find any canonical flaws in the works of Said Nursi," Maksud Sadikov, rector of the city's Institute of Theology and International Relations, told Forum 18 in an April 2010 interview. He also described Nursi as "a great scholar". Sadikov was killed by presumed Islamist militants in June 2011 (see F18News 26 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1450).

In addition to such regional opposition, commonalities in different district court decisions suggest they are not driven by local circumstance. The May 2007 Koptevo ruling cites the "expert" conclusion that Nursi's work 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" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981). The September 2010 Krasnoyarsk ruling cites exactly the same phrase, supposedly from its independent, local "expert" analysis (see F18News 29 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1504). Yet the text of that analysis does not contain the phrase.

Different arguments

Asked by Forum 18 after the Koptevo ruling what was dangerous about Nursi readers' activity, Valeri Kuzmin, the special investigator at Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office who initiated the case, maintained it was "only the literature" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

Promotion of "extremist" Nursi literature may also be offered as the underlying reason for prosecution of Nursi readers as alleged members of "Nurdzhular". In the ongoing Novosibirsk trial, for example, the charges maintain that "Nurdzhular" was banned due to "extremist activity based on dissemination of the teaching of Said Nursi and religious literature authored by him".

Yet Forum 18 finds the state's objections to "Nurdzhular" itself - as voiced in court materials and public statements by Public Prosecutor representatives - to be unconnected with its objections to Nursi literature.

The April 2008 Supreme Court decision banning "Nurdzhular" exists publicly only as a 7 May 2008 announcement in Rossiiskaya Gazeta, Russia's newspaper of public record. The state's objections to "Nurdzhular" partly emerge in lower courts' case material, however.

The September 2012 charges in the ongoing Novosibirsk trial, for example, accuse alleged "Nurdzhular" organisers Ilhom Merazhov and Komil Odilov of seeking "to change the form of state government and introduce Muslim religious government on the basis of sharia" (see F18News 28 February 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1808). Yet aspiration for such goals is nowhere found in court bans on Nursi literature. Despite this, the Novosibirsk charges further claim that Merazhov and Odilov used Nursi's "Risale-i Nur" as "a single complex for propagandising the views and ideas" of "Nurdzhular".

On announcing the one-year corrective labour sentence for "extremism" handed down to alleged "Nurdzhular" organiser Rashid Abdulov by an Ulyanovsk court in September 2011, the General Prosecutor's Office website made similar claims (see F18News 12 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1612). They claimed that his Nursi books and brochures "called for the total Islamisation of the population and changing the government of the Russian Federation in order to include it in the so-called Worldwide Caliphate".

Such reasons are also routinely offered by Public Prosecutor representatives for Russia's ban on "Nurdzhular". Vyacheslav Sizov - responsible at the General Prosecutor's Office for monitoring implementation of laws on federal security, international relations and "extremism" - highlighted "Nurdzhular" at a May 2009 roundtable on national security, Russkaya Liniya news agency reported. Sizov told representatives of his Office, the FSB security service, Emergencies Ministry and Migration Service that "Nurdzhular" was a "powerful political and financial structure" whose main aim was "to break up Russia and create an Islamic empire centred on Turkey" using Russian regions inhabited by Turkic peoples. He also alleged that "Nurdzhular" collaborates with the CIA, FBI and US State Department, and identified its leader as US-based Turkish educationalist Fetullah Gulen.

These geopolitical claims are nowhere substantiated in the relevant court decisions first banning Nursi literature and later prosecuting alleged "Nurdzhular" members, Forum 18 notes. Yet the fact that they pre-date the discovery of "extremism" in Nursi's work by court-commissioned "expert" analyses further suggests to Forum 18 that they lie at the root of Russia's anti-Nursi campaign.

While such reasoning was not cited in the corresponding May 2007 verdict, for example, Kuzmin of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office told Russian-language Rosbalt Information Agency in April 2007 that grounds for the Koptevo case to ban parts of "Risale-i Nur" included the authorities' concern that the activity of Nursi followers is financed from Turkey (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

Still posted on the website of the Russian Embassy in Turkey, a March 2004 Rossiiskaya Gazeta article announced the recent deportation from Russia of several Turkish clothing salesmen suspected of "Nurdzhular" membership. The report added that the men kept "banned literature by the sect's founder, Said Nursi" in their shop - over three years before any ban on Nursi literature had in fact been enacted in Russia. The report also suggested that "Nurdzhular" was a "Turkish religio-nationalist sect" that had conducted "pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic manipulation of Russian youth".

Claims that Nursi readers exert negative geopolitical influence are also routinely voiced by state media and some Russia-based researchers. Shortly after raids on Nursi readers in Dagestan, for example, a lengthy December 2009 article by the local branch of RIA Novosti state news agency warned that "conspiratorial cells" of Nursi readers - equated with "Nurdzhular" - aim to unite all Turkic peoples around Turkey in a "Turkic empire". Due to these aims, the article further maintained, "Nurdzhular" is supported by the intelligence agencies of Turkey and the USA, "whose aims are to weaken and then completely destroy Russia" (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400).

At the January 2013 roundtable hosted by the Tatarstan branch of the state-backed Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, its director Rais Suleimanov similarly claimed that "behind Nursism lies the ambition of Ankara and the USA to extend their geopolitical influence across the whole post-Soviet space," according to the Institute's website.

Scholars doubtful

Other specialists disagree, however. Bayram Balci, a French scholar with expertise on Islam in Turkey, the Caucasus and Central Asia, suggested to Forum 18 on 16 February that the Russian authorities "are well aware of the fact that Nursi's ideas are not fundamentalist or radical." Instead, he wonders if the main reason for their prohibition might be political: the Russian authorities "don't like Turkey's transformation into an important political power." Consequently, believes Balci, Russia worries that supporters of Nursi and especially educationalist Gulen, "reinforce the sentiment of common Turkic roots between Turks of Turkey and other Turkic or Muslim populations" - including Tatars, Bashkirs and Karachay in the Russian Federation - in order to prepare "a sort of sphere of influence for Turkey in all the former Soviet Union."

A specialist on Islam at the Centre for Ethnopolitical Studies within the Russian Academy of Sciences, Akhmet Yarlykapov is also sceptical. "The Russian authorities will always consider the books of Nursi, Fetullah Gulen, their readers and members of any corresponding organisations to be 'extremist' due to a completely irrational fear of so-called "pan-Turkism"," he commented to Forum 18 on 4 March. "This bogeyman has been around since the days of the Russian Empire, and is likely the result of the centuries-old rivalry between Russia and Turkey."

Yarlykapov also suggested to Forum 18 that the contradictory reasons given for determining Nursi and his readers "extremist" in court materials and officials' public statements arises "precisely because the officials are expressing the true reason for prosecuting Nursists: fear of imaginary "pan-Turkism". Although Nursi himself was a Kurd!" (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.

An analysis of the way that the Russian authorities have used the Pussy Riot case to intensify restrictions on freedom of religion or belief is at F18News 15 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1754.

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.

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