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# CRIMEA: Guns, weapons, drugs – and religious literature

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

*Crimea's acting Prime Minister Sergei Aksyonov has ordered a moratorium on raids, searches and literature confiscations until 1 January 2015. Before it there were many raids on libraries, schools, political organisations, Muslim homes, mosques and madrassahs, and Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls, Forum 18 News Service notes. Fines for possession of Islamic and Jehovah's Witness literature were also imposed. There do not seem to have been any raids and religious literature seizures since the moratorium. The government-appointed human rights Ombudsperson's office told Forum 18 that no action would be taken on the raids and literature seizures. Crimea's Education, Science and Youth Ministry has ordered education departments and educational institutions to remove and destroy any such literature. The Ministry official who drafted the order told Forum 18 that officials "should recycle them, use the paper again". Asked why some Islamic and Jehovah's Witness books should be destroyed, she replied: "I understand you, but the law is the law. I will answer for my role before God."*

After widespread protests by human rights defenders and Muslims against frequent raids, searches and literature confiscations, Crimea's Russian-backed acting Prime Minister Sergei Aksyonov ordered a three-month moratorium in mid-October, during which no punishments for possessing such literature would be imposed. The declared moratorium follows months of police, Russian FSB security service and Prosecutor's Office raids and searches across Crimea – including for religious literature banned under Russian law – in libraries, schools, political organisations, Muslim private homes, mosques and madrassahs (Islamic schools), and Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls, Forum 18 News Service notes.

Forum 18 is not aware of raids and religious literature seizures since Aksyonov ordered the moratorium. Among the fines imposed for possession of Muslim and Jehovah's Witness literature, one teacher was fined as a school library held three Muslim books. But the fine was overturned at the appeal of the prosecutor a week after the moratorium (see below).

Raids on Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses

The raids have been overwhelmingly concentrated on properties of the Crimean Tatar minority, which is mainly of Muslim background. Officials insist they are searching for guns, weapons, drugs and religious literature which has been banned as "extremist" in Russia and added to the Russian Justice Ministry's Federal List of Extremist Materials.

Some banned material on the Federal List argues for peace and respect for human rights, including Muslim theologian Muhammad ali Al-Hashimi's "The Personality of a Muslim" and the Chinese spiritual movement Falun Gong's leaflet "Global Human Rights Torch Relay". Other banned material on the List promotes racism, xenophobia or violence. Any lower court can decide that material is "extremist" and so should be added to the List, banning the material throughout Russia. Anyone in Russia who possesses material on the List is liable to face prosecution (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724).

Five Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls where they meet for worship have also been raided. Although many Jehovah's Witness publications have been added to the Federal List, their communities in Crimea had not earlier complained of raids and literature seizures from homes or places of worship since Russia forcibly annexed the peninsula from Ukraine in March.

However, in June Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea noted – like Muslims and followers of the Kiev Patriarchate Ukrainian Orthodox Church - "a significant increase in violence" against them since March (see F18News 26 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1972).

Islamic and Jehovah's Witness literature continues to be ruled "extremist" by courts in Russia, opening the way for yet more prosecutions for their possession or distribution under Article 20.29 ("Production or mass distribution of extremist materials") of Russia's Code of Administrative Offences (see F18News 8 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1994).

Crimea's Education, Science and Youth Ministry has ordered that "extremist" literature should be removed from libraries and destroyed (see below).


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Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights criticism

The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muiznieks, heard complaints from many Muslims about raids and searches during his 10 and 11 September mission to Crimea. He told local officials he regarded them as "disproportionate and excessive", he stated in his 27 October report (see https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&InstranetImage=2624575&SecMode=1&DocId=2197556&Usage=2 ). He also stated that the authorities had carried out what were described as "informative talks" with "scores of persons in order to check whether they adhered to 'undesirable' or 'non-traditional' forms of Islam".

"The perception among various representatives of the Crimean Tatar community" was that such raids and talks "were intrusive and performed with an intent to intimidate them", Muiznieks continued.

No action from human rights Ombudsperson

Despite protests about raids and seizures of religious literature, Kseniya Temnik, chief specialist to Crimea's government-appointed human rights Ombudsperson Lyudmila Lubina, said no one had appealed to her office. "We've had no appeals, either in writing or on the hotline," she told Forum 18 from the Crimean capital Simferopol on 23 October. "I can't say why people don't appeal. We've had many appeals from citizens on other issues."

Asked what action the Ombudsperson would take on the many raids and literature seizures, Temnik indicated that no action would be taken.

Temnik also said no appeals had been received about the Russian Federal Migration Service's refusal to extend residence permits for Catholic priests and Turkish Muslim imams and teachers, thus forcing them to leave Crimea (see F18News 11 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1996). Nor had appeals come in about the Justice Ministry's failure so far to re-register any religious communities (see F18News 3 November 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2012).

Promised moratorium on seizures

Acting Prime Minister Aksyonov first announced the moratorium when addressing Muslim pilgrims returning to Simferopol from the haj pilgrimage to Mecca on 13 October. He was responding to complaints from Muslim families whose homes had been raided.

"We will conduct no investigative measures related to the confiscation of literature," Russian news agency Ria-Novosti quoted him as telling the returning pilgrims. "We are calmly giving time to transition to a normal peaceful format. We will start from the position that we need a transitional period when we need to adapt ourselves and understand that we are now in Russia."

Aksyonov repeated his pledge the following day. "We are speaking publicly about this to give people a transitional period in which they must adapt themselves to Russian law," Russian news agency Itar-Tass quoted him on 14 October as stating. "Many people had literature which in Ukraine was permitted but under the laws of Russia is banned for use."

Aksyonov said "educational work" would be conducted among Muslims over the three-month period, while the media would publish a list of materials people were no longer allowed to own. "We actively cooperate with the Muftiate and ask Muslims who have such literature to hand it to the Muftiate." He warned that Russian law would be applied in full from 1 January 2015.

Neither the duty prosecutor nor the spokesperson at Crimea's Prosecutor's Office in Simferopol was able to tell Forum 18 on 27 October if any instruction had been issued to prosecutors telling them to halt raids, literature seizures and prosecutions until January 2015.

Many fines have been imposed for the possession of banned "extremist" Islamic and Jehovah's Witness literature found after searches by officials (some of them armed with automatic weapons) of homes, mosques and schools in August and September 2014 (see below).

"With the aim of its removal and destruction"

The campaign to remove religious and other books banned in Russia has also come from the leadership of Crimea's Education, Science and Youth Ministry. On 12 September, in a letter seen by Forum 18, Minister Natalya Goncharova wrote to all city and district education departments, as well as to educational institutions directly subordinated to Crimea's central authorities, ordering them to remove and destroy any such literature they find.

The Ministry "orders the administrations of educational organisations to conduct with the help of specialists an analysis and audit of literature present in libraries and educational premises on the subject of the presence of materials on the Federal List, with the aim of its removal and destruction", the letter states.


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Shefika Temesh, chief specialist at the Ministry who drafted the letter on behalf of Minister Goncharova, defended the order. "This is not about the worth of otherwise of an individual book," she insisted to Forum 18 from Simferopol on 24 October. "It is not about the Koran or the Bible. It is about books written by people which have been banned by the courts. The question is: are these desirable or undesirable books for school children to read?"

Temesh said local education departments had not yet reported back on how many books they had removed and destroyed. Asked how officials should destroy the books they seize, she responded: "They should recycle them, use the paper again. That's not destroying them, not throwing them on a fire. We don't burn books, but use them again."

Asked why books which followers of certain faiths find precious – such as "Fortress of a Muslim", a collection of prayers, or various Jehovah's Witness publications – should be destroyed, Temesh responded: "I understand you, but the law is the law. I will answer for my role before God."

Asked what an individual charged with destroying such books should do if they could not bring themselves to do so, Temesh told Forum 18: "It's difficult to say what they should do. They should write a statement explaining that they are unable to do so."

Fines

On 26 August, in the first known prosecution over religious literature since Russia forcibly annexed Crimea in March, a Crimean court punished a senior Muslim leader on "extremism" charges under Article 20.29 of Russia's Administrative Code. This punishes "Production or mass distribution of extremist materials" from the Federal List with a fine or imprisonment of up to 15 days and confiscation of the banned literature.

Under Administrative Code Article 20.29 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", Russian prosecutors have often brought charges even if only one copy of a text is discovered (see eg. F18News 1 August 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1728).

Dzhankoi District Court in northern Crimea on 26 August fined one of the deputy heads of the Muftiate, Esadullakh Bairov, 2,000 Russian Roubles (about 750 Ukrainian Hryvnas, 350 Norwegian Kroner, 40 Euros, or 55 US Dollars), after religious books were seized during a raid on a madrassah (Islamic religious school) which he oversees (see F18News 26 August 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1989).

On 28 August, two days after the first fine, Judge Denis Didenko of Simferopol's Kiev District Court fined Bairov 1,500 Russian Roubles under the same Article 20.29, according to the court decision seen by Forum 18. The seized books were ordered confiscated. He was fined in his capacity as director of Terciman Muslim bookshop in Simferopol, which had been raided in July. The officials found several copies of two books which have been banned under Russian "extremism" legislation (see F18News 3 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1992).

Nazi and fascist?

Strangely, in its description of Russia's Federal List, the court decision notes that it contains books by "leaders of Germany's Nazi party and Italy's fascist party". The court applied this description of the List – which has not been applied before now in Russia although it does contain such books - even though the books confiscated from Terciman bookshop were religious and had no connection with Nazi Germany or fascist Italy.

Bairov was fined under Article 20.29 for a third time on 10 September, this time 3,000 Russian Roubles by Judge Artyom Khachikyan of Kirovskoe District Court, according to court records.

Fined for school library with Islamic and Jehovah's Witness texts

On 7 October, Edie Yusupova, librarian at the Boarding School for Gifted Children in the village of Tankovoe in Bakhchisaray District, was similarly punished under Russian Administrative Code Article 20.29, according to the court decision seen by Forum 18. Judge Vasily Koshelev of Bakhchisaray District Court fined her 1,000 Russian Roubles (about 375 Ukrainian Hryvnas, 175 Norwegian Kroner, 20 Euros, or 27 US Dollars).

Yusupova was fined because the school library contained four works on the Federal List when it was raided on 9 September. Three - "Treatise on Nature", "Faith and the Person" and "Short Words" – are from the Risale-i Nur (Messages of Light) collection of sermons by the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. The fourth – "Questions of Youth: Practical Advice" – is a Jehovah's Witness booklet.

Among other recent cases, on 29 September, Judge Tatyana Gotovkina of Bakhchisaray District Court fined Mustafa Yagyaev 1,500 Roubles under Administrative Code Article 20.29, according to court records. Yagyaev, the chair of the Muslim community in the


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village of Turgenevka (Teberti in Crimean Tatar), was punished because police found and confiscated seven Muslim books during a raid on the village mosque.

On 30 September Judge Vitaly Mikhailov of Simferopol's Central District Court fined bookshop owner Lyudmila Dragileva 2,000 Russian Roubles and ordered the confiscation of the one "extremist" book found in her shop three weeks earlier: "Life of the Prophet" by the late Indian Muslim theologian Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri. "She considers that having on sale one copy does not represent storage with the aim of mass distribution," the court decision – seen by Forum 18 – cites Dragileva as arguing. "She asks for the opening of an administrative case to be refused." The Judge rejected her arguments.

On 8 October, Judge Viktor Mozhelyansky of Simferopol's Kiev District Court fined Ali Mokhamed Takha 3,000 Roubles under Article 20.29, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. He was punished for storing eight named Muslim texts - including "Fortress of a Muslim" - between 18 March and 16 August at the Creation Cultural Centre which he heads. The books were ordered confiscated.

On 16 October, Judge Olga Morozko of Bakhchisaray District Court fined local imam Savri Seidametov 1,000 Roubles under Article 20.29, according to court records. The same Judge had returned the case to Prosecutors a week earlier as it had not been properly prepared. Seidametov was fined for having two religious books in his mosque in the village of Bogatyr when it was raided on 24 September. However, only one is on Russia's Federal List: "A Word on Unity", which had been declared "extremist" in 2007. The book was ordered confiscated.

At least eight other cases under Article 20.29 reached court in Crimea between August and October. Many have resulted in fines. However, Forum 18 has been unable to establish whether these individuals were brought to court for possessing religious literature or for possessing racist or violent material.

Fine overturned, "verbal warning" after "repentance"

In contrast, a school-teacher in Belogorsk, Asie Abduvelieva, has had her fine overturned after an appeal by the prosecutor against her being fined. On 16 September, Judge Yevgeny Borisenko of Belogorsk District Court found her guilty under Article 20.29 of possessing three books on the Federal List: "Doubts generated over Centuries" Volume 2 by Turkish imam Fethullah Gulen, "General Introduction to Islam" by former Egyptian Grand Mufti Ali Al-Tantawi, and a brochure "Islamic Faith".

Abduvelieva admitted in court that she had the three books in her classroom when it was searched on 28 August and "repented", but denied she had distributed them. The headteacher and 12 other individuals signed statements that the books had been available for children to access, according to the court decision seen by Forum 18. Judge Borisenko fined her 1,000 Russian Roubles and ordered the books confiscated.

However, the prosecutor considered Abduvelieva's "offence" to be "insignificant" and appealed against the punishment. At Crimea's Supreme Court on 21 October, Judge Vladimir Bondarev upheld the prosecutor's appeal and cancelled the administrative case, the Supreme Court chancellery told Forum 18 on 28 October. Instead the judge gave Abduvelieva a "verbal warning".

17 September raids

Raids continued throughout August and September. An apparent peak came on 17 September, with raids on at least four homes, one mosque, and one village school.

Early on 17 September, four Crimean Tatar-owned homes were raided in the village of Kolchugino in Simferopol District, Radio Free Europe's (RFE) Crimean Service noted the same day. Investigators were allegedly investigating a fight between youths in the village 18 months earlier. Accompanying the investigators were armed police.

The home of the Ibrishev family was searched in the presence of two official witnesses brought by the raiders. They claimed to be looking for weapons, explosives, drugs and "extremist" literature. "Officers said they had received information that we allegedly had extremist literature," Zera Ibrisheva told RFE's Crimean Service. "They showed me and my brother Alim a court decision and began the search."

After searching the entire house, yard, shed and greenhouse for three hours, investigators seized three religious books. "They were given to us in school as Islamic teaching, and all this time they lay in the attic, but officers told us these publications are banned in Russia," Ibrisheva added.

Officers told Alim Ibrishev that he could have broken the law under the influence of these books and took him to the police station for questioning over the fight 18 months earlier. Also there were two of his friends whose homes had also been searched that day. They were freed that evening.

Also on 17 September, three Prosecutor's Office officials, FSB security service officers, and one official of the Emergency


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Situations Ministry raided Borchokrak Mosque in the Fontany district of Simferopol, RFE's Crimean Service noted that day. They wanted to inspect how prayers were conducted and whether the community was involved in "extremist" activity. "We talked to those conducting the inspection and explained that we conduct no aggressive actions," Shevket Bekirov, head of the local Crimean Tatar Mejlis told RFE. Initially, those coming to the day-time namaz (prayers) were prevented from entering the mosque but were then let in.

Prosecutor's Office officials seized three Muslim books they said were on the Federal List, including "Fundamentals of Islam" (presumably the book by Abua Ala Maududi, banned in Russia in 2007). Five further books were seized for "checking". Officials found these other books "suspicious", local Crimean Tatar representative Ibraim Zinedinov told QHA news agency. "They said: we'll take them, experts will check them and then we'll return them."

"We can't give such information – it's restricted"

An official of Simferopol's Central District Prosecutor's Office – who would not give his name – refused to explain why the mosque had been raided, why the books had been seized, whether any would be returned or whether anyone would be prosecuted. "We can't give such information – it's restricted," he told Forum 18 on 27 October.

Another raid on 17 September was on the village school in Zuya in Belogorsk District, whose language of instruction is Crimean Tatar. Three officers of the FSB security service conducted the raid, a local resident told RFE's Crimean Service. They searched classrooms, the library and teachers' offices looking for "banned" religious literature. "In this minority school are two teachers who wear religious clothing to work, and officers mainly devoted their special attention to them and began in their offices," the resident added.

Other September raids

More than 10 armed men arrived at 5 am on 10 September at the home of Idris Ametov and his family in the village of Kamenskoe in Lenin District, he told QHA news agency the same day. Among items seized were Muslim publications, including Said Wahf Al-Qahtani's "Fortress of a Muslim". This is a collection of prayers of which three Russian-language editions were banned, along with 64 other books, in a 20 minute court hearing in the Russian city of Orenburg in 2012 (see F18News 19 June 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1713).

Also on 10 September 2014, five Prosecutor's Office officials raided the library of the Crimean Engineering Pedagogical University in the hunt for "banned" literature.

On 16 September, officials raided the home of Mustafa Asaba, chair of the Belogorsk regional Mejlis, hunting for guns, weapons, drugs and "banned" literature. They seized several books on religion as well as some on the Crimean Tatar national movement, he told Radio Free Europe's Crimean Service.

Also on 16 September, more than 25 officers (more than 10 of them armed with automatic weapons) raided the Simferopol headquarters of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis, as well as a charitable fund and newspaper in the same building. Islamic books were among items seized during a 12-hour search.

Justifying the raid the following day, acting prime minister Aksyonov told Itar-Tass Russian news agency that "special services were carrying out their work in accordance with instructions" by raiding the Mejlis. "Certain information had been received about the presence in the building of forbidden literature and items."

On 22 September, many FSB security service officers and other identified men conducted a five-hour raid on Derekoi Mosque in the town of Yalta, QHA news agency noted the following day, quoting local residents.

Officers seized three books. Two of them are on Russia's Federal List: "Islam Today" and "Fundamentals of Islam" by Abu Ala Maududi, some of whose works have promoted violence. Both books were banned in 2007 (see Forum 18's Russia "Extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724).

The third book seized is not banned in Russia: "Path to faith and completeness" by Shamil Alyautdinov, imam of Moscow's Memorial Mosque. One resident described the seizure of Alyautdinov's book as "most unexpected", as the author is "perfectly legal in Russia" and "has been checked and found to be 100 percent 'one of us'".

The deputy head of the Crimean Muftiate, Ayder Ismailov, said that the day after the raid, the FSB security service summoned the Turkish imam of Derekoi Mosque for three hours of questioning.

Eighteen of Crimea's 23 Turkish imams have been forced to leave the territory (see F18News 3 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1992). (END)


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