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RUSSIA: One Muslim's blighted life in Kabardino-Balkaria

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Until 2004, Kabardian radio presenter Ali Pshigotyzhev enthusiastically spread Islam with the assistant directors of the Islamic Research Institute, the main rival to Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate. Then, at the height of the North Caucasus republic's crackdown on active Muslims and a few years before his retirement, he was sacked for religious reasons, he told Forum 18 News Service. "But praise be to Allah, now I can devote the rest of my life to studying and writing about Islam." Ali's son Zaur was similarly laid off from his police job in 2003, and wrongly convicted of distributing extremist literature and possession of firearms in 2004, his father insists. Zaur Pshigotyzhev was also detained and allegedly tortured following the 2005 uprising in the capital, Nalchik, but released due to numerous witness statements in his defence. Kabardino-Balkaria Public Prosecutor's Office has refused to comment to Forum 18.

Five years ago, Ali Pshigotyzhev was nearing the end of a 30-year broadcasting career. An announcer on the state's Kabardian-language radio station, he presented news and general interest programmes. Then, on 1 May 2004, he told Forum 18 News Service, he was sacked for his Muslim beliefs.

"It was partly because I openly pray five times a day," he explained in Nalchik, capital of the southern Russian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, on 24 July, "and also because I used to greet listeners with an Adyghe [ethnic group including Kabardins] blessing which mentions Allah." Pshigotyzhev's bosses at Kabalkteleradio told him he could not utter the blessing in a state institution, he told Forum 18. On protesting that other presenters did so, "they said others could, but not me." After several warnings, Pshigotyzhev was then laid off: "It would have been too brazen to sack me for the real reason, as that would have been seen as persecution for religious belief, so they just said it was due to a reduction in staff."

Forum 18 has repeatedly tried to contact Kabalkteleradio without success.

Kabalkteleradio ceased broadcasting programmes in Kabardian and Balkar in January 2004 citing a reduction in funding from its parent All-Russia State Television and Radio Company, Caucasian Knot human rights website reported in March 2004.

Pshigotyzhev lost his job at the height of Kabardino-Balkaria's 2003-5 crackdown on mosque-going Muslims (see F18News 19 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172>). Others openly praying five times a day or entered onto police lists of alleged extremists also report being barred from employment (see F18News 20 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1173>).

Forum 18 is unaware of reports about state repression towards non-Muslim confessions in Kabardino-Balkaria.

Active Muslims independent of Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate, particularly the unregistered Islamic Research Institute, were the main targets, Pshigotyzhev told Forum 18. The former radio presenter knew well the Institute's assistant directors, Anzor Astemirov and Musa Mukozhev: "We all worked together, spread Islam together." Pshigotyzhev - who is unfamiliar with the internet - said he has no idea what happened to the pair and believes they were not involved in unlawful activity (see forthcoming article).

Muslims independent of the Spiritual Directorate do not accept views on Islam commonly held in Kabardino-Balkaria, Pshigotyzhev explained to Forum 18: "In the same way that Russians think they are Christian, people here automatically consider themselves Muslim if they are Kabardian." The former radio presenter also used to share this view; growing up in the village of Zayukova in the North Caucasus foothills, his parents used to pray five times a day, "but I didn't understand why my father said it was necessary. We were living under the communist regime, and no contemporaries prayed. You couldn't study Islam freely then."

When Pshigotyzhev began to investigate Islam in the 1990s, he told Forum 18, "I began to understand that you are a Muslim believer only if you utter the shahadah [declaration of belief in Allah and Mohammed as his prophet], profess tawhid - monotheism - and follow the canons of Islam; keep away from haram - what is forbidden - and do good deeds." This difference in outlook is at the root of Kabardino-Balkaria's repressive policy towards its practising Muslims, he maintained (see forthcoming article).

Ali Pshigotyzhev remains optimistic despite his tribulations. "Alhamdulillah [Arabic: Praise be to Allah], I am glad I was sacked," he remarked to Forum 18. "Now I can devote the rest of my life to studying and writing about Islam."

Pshigotyzhev's son also encountered employment problems due to his active faith. Zaur Pshigotyzhev was sacked from his police job in 2003 after rejecting an order to arrest a person he knew was innocent in place of a known criminal, his father explained to Forum 18: "I brought him up to be honest, just as my parents did me. But what job can you go to if you pray five times a day, if you're a Muslim?" So his son became a taxi driver.

Later in 2003 - in the first such case in Kabardino-Balkaria - Zaur Pshigotyzhev was charged with inciting religious hatred for distributing several copies of "Through the Prism of Islam" by an apparently local author, Abu Al-Khadi ibn Ali. While there is "nothing bad or terrorist" in this book, Ali Pshigotyzhev insisted to Forum 18, it does contain "very concrete criticism" of then Kabardino-Balkaria president Valeri Kokov. Unable to establish Zaur as the author, Nalchik City Court on 15 January 2004 handed him a one-year suspended sentence for circulating three copies of the work, including to his father. "No one at the trial testified that he passed a copy to me," Ali Pshigotyzhev noted to Forum 18, "but that was still in the verdict." "Through the Prism of Islam" was among additions to Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials announced on 24 October 2007.

Some commentators, including Russia's Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin, Council of Muftis chairman Ravil Gainutdin and Moscow-based Islam specialist Aleksei Malashenko, have expressed profound concern over the inclusion of a number of Islamic texts onto the Federal List of Extremist Materials (see most recently F18News 17 July 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1160>).

Russia's application of religious extremism charges continues to widen. On 25 June 2008 a Moscow district public prosecutor issued an extremism warning to local Baptist pastor Petr Sautov without specifying its grounds for doing so, the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice reported. Other recent targets have included Jehovah's Witnesses, traditional Mari pagans and Tatar-Turkish schools (see F18News 29 May 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136>).

On 18 October 2004, Zaur Pshigotyzhev was again detained after police found a machine gun magazine and 20 bullets in his car, which his father insisted to Forum 18 were planted. He subsequently received a further one-year suspended sentence.

Other local Muslims have also maintained to Forum 18 that confiscated weaponry and allegedly extremist literature were planted by police. State representatives have countered these claims (see F18News 19 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172>).

Boris Pashtov, head of the Kabardino-Balkaria parliament's recently formed Committee for Youth Affairs and Social Organisations - whose brief includes religious affairs - is unfamiliar with Zaur Pshigotyzhev's case, he told Forum 18 on 25 July.

A spokesperson at Kabardino-Balkaria Public Prosecutor's Office refused to tell Forum 18 on 18 August whether it has a case open in relation to Zaur Pshigotyzhev.

When some 200 militants began to target state security departments in Nalchik on 13 October 2005, Zaur Pshigotyzhev was driving his taxi as usual, his father told Forum 18 (see F18News 18 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171>). When he went missing soon afterwards, however, his family searched the city's police stations, hospitals and morgues. On 20 October a lawyer found Zaur at Kabardino-Balkaria's organised crime police department, where he had been beaten and tortured for several days following his 15 October arrest, according to Ali Pshigotyzhev.

Some other relatives of detainees also claim they were not involved in the Nalchik uprising but were arrested and tortured as a result of their active Muslim faith. State representatives have denied these claims to Forum 18 (see F18News 18 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171>).

Zaur Pshigotyzhev was released in late November 2005 after 18 witness statements concurred with his alibi, his father told Forum 18. On 12 January 2006, however, Zaur's empty car was found near a forest road outside Nalchik. Nothing had been stolen and there was no blood or other signs of a struggle, Ali Pshigotyzhev told Forum 18. "He just disappeared. We still don't know whether he's alive or dead." (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <<http://www.samstar.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=947>.

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>>.

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