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RUSSIA: Government checks on religious organisations seek "extremism"

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

"Extremism" was a key reason given for Russia's state inspections of some Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Muslim communities this Spring, Forum 18 News Service notes. Yet no signs of "extremism" were found during the vast majority of government checks. For example, a Pentecostal Church in Russia's Far East was initially accused of "extremism" when a Public Prosecutor inspection found its statutes did not specify that non-citizens could participate in its activity as well as Russian citizens. These accusations were soon dropped. But in Irkutsk Region and Sakha (Yakutia) Republic, administrative cases for "production or distribution of extremist materials" were opened against local Muslim leaders, one resulting in a fine. One of the cases related to possession of a translation of a work by Islamic theologian Said Nursi. Muslims are, like Jehovah's Witnesses, subject to ongoing checks for "extremism". Searches of their communities this Spring were thus not necessarily part of the NGO sweep.

"Extremism" was a key reason given for Russia's state inspection of some Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Muslim communities this Spring, Forum 18 News Service notes. No signs of "extremism" were found during the vast majority of government checks. But in two instances in Irkutsk Region and Sakha (Yakutia) Republic, administrative cases for "production or distribution of extremist materials" were opened against local Muslim leaders, one resulting in a fine.

"Extremism"-related crimes

The original General Prosecutor order for this Spring's NGO (non-governmental organisation) sweep has not been made public, Dmitry Kolbasin of Russian human rights organisation Agora told Forum 18 on 15 May. However, the 10-page order for corresponding check-ups issued by Samara Regional Public Prosecutor's Office to its sub-offices on 28 February evidently follows from it. Seen by Forum 18, it explains that inspections should check implementation of laws on "surveillance and criminal procedure" when dealing with "extremism"-related crimes, as well as compliance with the 2002 Extremism Law by "social and religious associations and other non-commercial organisations".

At a 15 April extraordinary meeting on the check-ups hosted by Russia's Presidential Human Rights Council, Justice Ministry official Tatyana Vaghina stated that her Ministry had looked for - but failed to find - evidence of "extremism" in the 528 checks in which it participated, according to the Council's website (see F18News 22 May 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1839>).

Earlier contacted by Forum 18 about her dealings with religious organisations, Vaghina said she was not authorised to comment to the press (see F18News 12 November 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1216>).

Particularly since 2007, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Falun Gong practitioners have been prosecuted and their literature banned under the 2002 Extremism Law. Charges of "extremism" have occasionally featured in government moves against Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals and Hare Krishna devotees, but these have yet to result in systemic state action against them (see Forum 18's Russia "extremism" religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1724>).

"Laughable" accusations

In the southern Siberian city of Barnaul (Altai Region) in April, Public Prosecutor and Justice Ministry officials "were looking for religious extremism - if our church had any banned extremist literature," Pastor Mikhail Kashevarov of the local Cornerstone Pentecostal Church told Forum 18 on 7 May. Ultimately, however, the authorities' only complaint was that the church had not registered its logo (see F18News 28 May 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1841>).

In the Jewish Autonomous Region in Russia's Far East, a church similarly affiliated to Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky's Russia-wide Pentecostal Union was initially accused of "extremism" when a Public Prosecutor inspection found its statutes did not specify that non-citizens could participate in its activity as well as Russian citizens, Moscow-based Sova reported on 26 April. However, these "laughable" accusations were soon dropped, Ryakhovsky's chief assistant Konstantin Bendas told Forum 18 on 14 May.

Protestant leaders have stated that they are generally unconcerned by the checks. However, on 18 April the blog of Belarusian Baptist Vasily Trubchik reported that Baptists at churches in Russian regional centres Tambov and Orel insisted he ask their pastors' permission before photographing their prayer houses. Partly, wrote Trubchik, this was due to their anxiety over checks for "extremism". "Corresponding people from the Public Prosecutor's Office or Investigative Committee have started visiting evangelical churches and asking various questions. Of course, believers who experienced terrible persecution in the past and pressure from those same organs found these inspections painful."

Inspectors looked for, but did not find, "manifestations of extremism in the activity of religious organisations" when visiting the Catholic charity Caritas' Moscow branch on 9 April, Fr Igor Kovalevsky, General Secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Russia, told Nezavisimaya Gazeta newspaper. Saratov Regional Public Prosecutor's Office also conducted checks on the local Catholic parish of St Clement - among religious and other NGOs - in order to check compliance with the Extremism Law, the Office's website reported on 20 March.

"As our consciences tell us"

An Orthodox priest in the village of Zavyalovo (Udmurtia Republic), Fr Sergi Kondakov was likewise summoned to meet a local Public Prosecutor's official on 9 April in connection with "the fight against extremism", Portal-Credo religious news website reported. In 2011, Fr Sergi's parish stopped commemorating Patriarch Kirill of the Moscow Patriarchate during services. It now recognises Odessa-based Metropolitan Agafangel (Pashkovsky), the only hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad who refused to accept the Church's 2007 reunification with the Moscow Patriarchate.

According to a list compiled by Agora human rights organisation, Orthodox parishes recognising Metropolitan Agafangel in six Russian cities were checked as part of the NGO sweep. Reached on 15 May, however, Fr Ignaty Krutkov of one such parish in St Petersburg said he knew of no inspections. Forum 18's repeated calls to his Pskov Region-based archbishop went unanswered, as did those to Fr Sergi Kondakov.

In a video on the Zavyalovo parish's blog recorded immediately afterwards, Fr Sergi said he was pleased with how his 9 April meeting with Public Prosecutor officials had gone. Insisting that he had "fought extremism all my conscious life", Fr Sergi added that he would like Russia "never to return to that disgraceful practice of the Soviet years; that an equals symbol is never placed between dissent and extremism. We are Orthodox Christians, law-abiding citizens, but at the same time we wish to profess our faith not as Patriarch Kirill proposes (..) but as our consciences tell us, and we have the right to do that."

While not affiliated with Metropolitan Agafangel, a breakaway Orthodox publication has similarly been targeted as "extremist" for criticising the Moscow Patriarchate's support for ecumenism and the Putin regime. On 22 June 2012 a single issue of "Easter in the Third Rome" was ruled "extremist" by Abakan City Court (Khakassia Republic), Khakassia Republican Public Prosecutor's Office reported. The issue - sponsored by the Moscow Patriarchate's former bishop to Chukotka and Anadyr, Diomid (Dzyuban) - is now at No. 1452 on Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials.

Seen by Forum 18, the banned issue consists solely of theological criticism of the Catholic Church and what is seen as Patriarch Kirill's ecumenical stance towards it. It does not call for any actions - violent or otherwise - towards people sharing such views.

(For background on the Federal List, see Forum 18's Russia "extremism" religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1724>.)

Widespread state inspections

The religious communities affected by the inspections were among numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) inspected by state officials across Russia from early March, in a sweep apparently seeking to uncover foreign backing for political opposition initiatives. Yet Forum 18 notes that controversial new regulations on foreign funding for NGOs - including designation of some as "foreign agents" - do not in law apply to religious organisations (see F18News 22 May 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1839>).

Forum 18 has found religious organisations' experience of the check-ups to be mixed (see F18News 28 May 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1841>).

A press spokesperson at the General Prosecutor's Office insisted to Forum 18 in March that all questions be submitted by fax. Forum 18 has earlier faxed questions to the Office's press service but received no response (see F18News 21 March 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1815>).

"Extremist" literature

Four Muslim organisations feature on Agora human rights organisation's list of NGOs checked across Russia as of 24 April, when

the sweep appeared to be ending.

Based in the southern Moscow districts of Northern and Southern Butovo, Mercy local Muslim organisation was inspected on 25 March by Aleksandr Goncharov of the city's Southwestern District Public Prosecutor's Office together with a police Counter-extremism Department official, according to Nezavisimaya Gazeta newspaper.

Forum 18's questions about the inspection emailed to the Public Prosecutor's Office on 22 May went unanswered by the end of the working day in Moscow on 27 May. Contacted on 28 May, a secretary at the Office was familiar with the inspection of Mercy Muslim organisation, but after consultation responded that Forum 18's emailed questions would be answered within two weeks.

Also on Agora's list were Kirov Regional Muftiate; Mosque Muslim religious organisation in Usolye-Sibirskoye (Irkutsk Region); and Spiritual Centre Muslim organisation in Neryungri (Sakha Republic).

On 10 April the website of Irkutsk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office confirmed that its Usolye-Sibirskoye branch had checked Mosque organisation's compliance with the 2002 Extremism Law. The inspection reportedly uncovered a copy of "The Foundations of Sincerity", a part of Turkish theologian Said Nursi's "Risale-i Nur" Koranic commentary. This work was ruled "extremist" in May 2007 by Moscow's Koptevo District Court (see F18News 27 June 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981>). It is No. 46 on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, and therefore may not be distributed anywhere in Russia.

The state has offered weak or no reasons for banning this and other Nursi works as "extremist" (see F18News 5 March 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1811>).

According to the 10 April Public Prosecutor report, an administrative case was subsequently opened against Mosque community's imam, Salokhiddin Saidov, for "production or distribution of extremist materials" (Code of Administrative Offences, Article 20.29).

Usolye-Sibirskoye City Court website lists an administrative case for an S. M. Saidov on 22 April, but gives no details or any result. Forum 18 asked the court for further details of any resulting prosecution by email on 22 May. There was no response by the end of the working day in Usolye-Sibirskoye on 27 May. Directed to the Court's chancellery, Forum 18's repeated calls on 28 May went unanswered.

A similar case was opened on 13 March following the discovery of "extremist" literature during a raid that day on the Spiritual Centre Muslim organisation in Neryungri. Three brochures on the Federal List were found and seized, Sakha Prosecutor's Office noted on its website on 15 March. While one of the brochures was an issue of the Hizb ut-Tahrir journal "Al-Vai" (Awareness), another was an edition of Said Wahf Al-Qahtani's entirely benign "Fortress of the Muslim", Forum 18 notes.

An administrative case was prepared against the Centre's imam, Abdul-Khamid Terkatiev, under Article 20.29. That same day, 13 March, Neryungri City Court found him guilty, fined him 1,000 Roubles (about 190 Norwegian Kroner, 25 Euros or 30 US Dollars) and ordered the three brochures confiscated, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. The court rejected Terkatiev's protestations that an unknown member of the 100 to 150-strong Muslim community might have placed the three brochures in the prayer room without his knowledge.

Terkatiev appealed against the fine, but on 3 April Sakha Republic Supreme Court left the lower court verdict unchanged, according to the Supreme Court decision seen by Forum 18.

Ongoing checks on Muslims

Muslims are, like Jehovah's Witnesses, subject to ongoing checks for "extremism" (see F18News 5 March 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1811>). Searches of their communities this Spring were thus not necessarily part of the NGO sweep.

On 26 April, for example, FSB security service and other law enforcement agents searched premises in Moscow's Southern District rented by the city's Dar-ul-Arkam Muslim community after the end of Friday prayers. This was "for persons involved in the activity of Islamic extremist organisations," Moscow FSB stated via Interfax the same day. Following the search, police detained 140 worshippers, reportedly in order to determine their identity.

Forum 18's questions about the search emailed to Southern District Public Prosecutor's Office on 22 May went unanswered by the end of the working day in Moscow on 27 May. Forum 18's repeated calls to the Office went unanswered on 28 May.

In the Far Eastern city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (Sakhalin Region) on 4 April, masked and armed law enforcement agents searched the office rented by the local Muslim community, its imam Abdulmalik Mirzoyev told Forum 18 on 13 May. This was due to police detaining a Muslim visiting from Moscow who attended the community's Friday prayers but had nothing to do with its organisational body, Mirzoyev explained.

On 17 May Sakhalin regional FSB confirmed the 27 March arrest of an unnamed Muslim on suspicion of belonging to banned Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, the regional police website noted. The individual now faces criminal charges. Sakhalin's Muslim organisation is "very distant" from Hizb ut-Tahrir, Mirzoyev insisted to Forum 18. "We don't have any links with dubious organisations as that would create difficulties for us. We understand that very well."

Ongoing checks on Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witness communities in Russia have reported 142 Public Prosecutor inspections since the beginning of March 2013, a higher than normal monthly figure, and they are particularly concerned by the inspection of their headquarters in Russia (see F18News 28 May 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1841>).

It is unclear how many were directly due to the NGO sweep, however, as such checks are ongoing (see F18News 27 March 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1818>). (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>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>>.

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