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RUSSIA: Jehovah's Witness war veteran prosecuted for extremism

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An 85-year-old veteran of the Second World War is the first Russian Jehovah's Witness known to have been prosecuted for "production and distribution of extremist materials", Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The prosecution is the latest turn in the ongoing nationwide state campaign against the Jehovah's Witnesses. Aleksei Fedorin, the veteran, denied the charges, explaining that police gathered various Jehovah's Witness titles he distributed for several years before they were banned, and that he was ill on the recent days he is alleged to have distributed them. Fedorin was also interrogated for eight and a half hours continuously, although he suffers from dizziness and faints. The judge in the case refused to comment on her decision to Forum 18. Earlier prosecutions for producing and distributing religious literature have involved controversially banned Islamic titles. Previous cases against Jehovah's Witnesses have rested on little-used provisions of some regional Administrative Codes. In at least one case, an attempt appears to have been made to recruit a Jehovah's Witness as an FSB informer.

Aleksei Fedorin, an 85-year-old Russian veteran of the Second World War, is the first Jehovah's Witness known to have been prosecuted for distributing extremist material, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The prosecution is the latest turn in the ongoing nationwide state campaign against the Jehovah's Witnesses, which gathered speed with the addition of numerous Jehovah's Witness books and brochures to the Federal List of Extremist Materials in March 2010. Earlier such prosecutions have involved Islamic literature.

Fedorin, a Jehovah's Witness for 50 years, was fined 1,000 Roubles (99 Norwegian Kroner, 13 Euros, or 17 US Dollars) on 28 July, for the offence of "production and distribution of extremist materials" under Article 20.29 of the Administrative Violations Code, by Judge Viktoria Samokhina of Tselina District Court. He denied the charges, explaining that the local police officer who initiated the case gathered copies of various Jehovah's Witness titles he had distributed to his neighbours in the village of Sredny Yegorlyk (Rostov-on-Don Region) over several years before they were banned in December 2009, but claimed to Tselina District Public Prosecutor's Office that Fedorin had distributed them in June 2010.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, Tselina District Public Prosecutor Aleksandr Lysenin interrogated Fedorin for eight and a half hours without a lunchbreak on 26 July, even though the war veteran suffers from dizziness and faints. Classified as disabled, Fedorin insisted that he was ill and did not take part in any religious activity on the days in June he is alleged to have distributed the literature.

Judge Viktoria Samokhina categorically refused to comment on her decision to Forum 18 on 3 August.

A combine harvester driver in his youth, Fedorin was awarded several Soviet awards and medals for his labour and also fought in the Second World War. When the KGB secret police discovered he was a Jehovah's Witness in the 1960s, he was repeatedly sacked, leading him to move to the Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, where the KGB continued to pursue him. He served five years in a prison camp because the authorities viewed his religious convictions as "anti-Soviet".

Law enforcement agencies have recently obstructed public and private religious activity by Baptists, Hare Krishnas and Jehovah's Witnesses. In the course of this the authorities have acted with undue severity against elderly or infirm Jehovah's Witnesses both in public (see F18News 26 July 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1469>), and during raids on private homes (see F18News 2 August 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1473>).

Other prosecutions

Earlier prosecutions under Article 20.29's offence of "production and distribution of extremist materials" have been for distributing controversially banned religious literature have involved Islamic titles. In late 2008, a Moscow chain of bookshops was fined 50,000 roubles (10,809 Norwegian Kroner, 1,160 Euros or 1,535 US Dollars) for stocking "The Personality of a Muslim", a book promoting tolerance by Arab theologian Muhammad ali Al-Hashimi. In August 2008, a bookseller in Saratov was handed down a lesser fine for

stocking two copies of the same title (see F18News 16 January 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1241>).

A case opened under Article 20.29 is also pending against Komil Odilov, a Muslim reader of the theologian Said Nursi (see F18News 27 July 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1470>).

In the few previous cases against Jehovah's Witnesses in connection with their now-banned literature, law enforcement agents have prosecuted Jehovah's Witnesses on other grounds, including with little-used provisions in some regional Administrative Codes for "harassment with the aim of imposing religious convictions".

In the southern region of Belgorod, Jehovah's Witness Sergei Ishchenko was recently fined 1,000 Roubles for this offence and a further 500 Roubles for not having missionary accreditation under the region's 2001 Law on Missionary Activity. This Law encouraged several other regions to produce their own anti-missionary laws (see F18News 12 July 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=360>).

On 27 November 2009, a team from the Belgorod police Counterextremism Department swooped on Ishchenko after he discussed his faith with a second man on a bench in a central Belgorod street and gave him a copy of "What Does the Bible Really Teach?". Apparently determined to prosecute Ishchenko, city prosecutor Andrei Shestakov had previously attempted to launch a criminal case against him five times, but failed as the ban on the title had not come into force at the time of the incident.

While they have not resulted in prosecution so far, a further five criminal investigations into extremist activity are currently open in Asbest (Sverdlovsk Region), Chelyabinsk, Gorno-Altai (Altai Republic), Omsk and Tambov, Grigory Martynov of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 14 July.

Public prosecutors in Lipetsk and Tula Regions issued official extremism warnings on 7 May and 31 March respectively to individuals for distributing banned titles, the Moscow-based Sova Center reported on 18 June. Under the federal 2002 Extremism Law, failure to comply with such a warning may result in prosecution.

The Jehovah's Witnesses note some success in defending their members in Cherepovets (Vologda Region), where 25 civil cases against Jehovah's Witnesses were dropped in June, and Tambov, where the regional court ruled on 15 April that a 17 March search warrant for the home of the Cheprunov family was unlawful (see F18News 22 March 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1424>).

FSB recruitment attempt?

After being summoned to the police station in Aksai (Rostov-on-Don Region) on 12 May, Jehovah's Witness Andrei Goncharov was threatened by a man who identified himself as "Roman Kolesnikov, head of counterextremism in the district for the organs" (an apparent reference to the FSB security service), as he told Forum 18 on 29 July. The officer explained that non-legal measures - such as planted drugs and weaponry or apparently random action by criminals - could be used against him as an alternative to legal prosecution should he fail to co-operate with the authorities.

Goncharov was then taken by car from the police station to a nearby office with a smaller portrait of Lenin and a larger one of Felix Dzerzhinsky - founder of the brutal Bolshevik secret police - on the wall. There he was threatened with prosecution under Article 239 of the Criminal Code ("organisation of an association infringing upon the person and rights of the citizen") if he failed to inform on fellow Jehovah's Witnesses. When he refused, the officer told him how "people change their minds after two months in a temporary detention facility".

"Kolesnikov" told Goncharov that they had tried to "talk to" other Jehovah's Witnesses, but had not "made contact" with them, euphemisms for recruiting informers. Goncharov told Forum 18 that he knows of fellow Jehovah's Witnesses who have been pressured to inform for the FSB, but who refused.

Goncharov went to the police station in the first place having been summoned for questioning on 7 May by Captain Eduard Paly of the ordinary police, but the meeting was delayed until 12 May. Captain Paly told Forum 18 on 9 June that Goncharov was one of some 6,000 local people summoned for questioning over four murders that took place in 2008-9, though he stressed he has since been eliminated from enquiries. He claimed that on 12 May he asked Goncharov to wait as he was in a meeting, and when he returned to question him he was gone.

Mikhail Reznikov, head of Aksai District Police, adamantly denied to Forum 18 on 9 June that any officer named Kolesnikov works for the police. He equally denied that any officer could have threatened anyone or tried to recruit them as an informer. "That would be illegal - it wouldn't happen," he claimed. He also denied that Goncharov could have been questioned by an official from another agency. "I would know if anyone from another agency came in to interview someone on police premises."

Rostov-on-Don Regional FSB security service denied absolutely to Forum 18 on 9 June that any officer named Roman Kolesnikov works for them in the region.

Goncharov told Forum 18 that "Kolesnikov" had taken part in a raid on Aksai's Jehovah's Witness congregation in the summer of 2009, but did not give his name or present any official identification.

He added that in the days after Forum 18's interview with Police Chief Reznikov, he had received a call from him checking that he had no complaints against the police and telling him that if anyone tries to recruit him as an informer he should inform the police.

Campaign source

While Rostov-on-Don was not the first region to pursue a ban on Jehovah's Witness literature, its regional court's 11 September 2009 ruling - upheld by the Supreme Court on 8 December 2009 - sparked the present campaign (see F18News 8 December 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1385>).

That ruling rests overwhelmingly on the view that Jehovah's Witness literature is extremist because it criticises other religions - and that harsh state sanctions are therefore justified. Regarding the banned children's publication "My Book of Bible Stories", for example, the verdict's evidence of extremism is that the book regards traditional Christianity as a false religion under satanic influence, and clerics as hypocritical, self-interested and cruel. The full evidence given for this are five quotations from the book, differing from established Biblical interpretation: "Satan the Devil wanted to kill the Son of God... Therefore no other than Satan lit the star [of Bethlehem]"; "Who were these enemies? Correct - religious leaders"; "The priests killed Jesus just as they chose to free Barabbas and then shouted to Pilate to kill him, not the people"; "Religious leaders are not able to contain their rage!"; "He understands that some of them have been deceived by religious leaders".

In Russia, strong rejection of others' religious or non-religious world views - as with such statements - is increasingly interpreted by the authorities as extremism which may be met with heavy state sanctions. However, many argue that free and open discussion - including strong criticism - of religious and non-religious views is an inalienable part of a free society. This also includes strong criticism of statements regarded as extreme (see F18News 19 July 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468>). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196>.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: - 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287> - and - 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288>).

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, is at F18News 26 May 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570>.

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>.

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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>>.

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