The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Moscow Broadens Definition of 'Extremism'

By Paul Goble

June 02, 2009



About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

After transferring thousands of Interior Ministry officers from the fight against organized crime to the struggle with extremism, the Russian government has broadened the definition of "extremism" as well as the scope of actions able to be taken by officers to combat it, a trend that threatens the rights and freedoms of law-abiding Russian citizens.

In the third in a series of articles in Yezhednevny Zhurnal on how the government is conducting its fight against extremism, security services expert Irina Borogan of Agentura.ru points out that "since the spring of this year, thousands of police officers throughout the country have been forced to occupy themselves with the search for extremists."

But, she continues, "it is already obvious that there are not enough extremists for all of them," and, consequently, the authorities want "to boost the number of extremists" in order to justify the new direction of the Interior Ministry, known in Russian by the acronym MVD. Unfortunately, for the police, "it is not [yet] a simple matter to do this legally through

the courts."

In 2008, Borogan notes, Russian courts "refused to recognize" the presence of "an extremist motive in almost half the cases" brought before them, and the cases the police and prosecutors had brought thus "collapsed." As a result, the MVD extremist fighters are now focusing on "'the prevention' of [such] crimes."

As several recent court cases have shown, Borogan continues, that involves the covert monitoring of telephone conversations, letters, and physical movement around the country and across its borders of individuals the authorities suspect of being potential "extremists" and the compiling of "black lists" of such people, regardless of whether any charges have been brought against them.

The existence of this practice was confirmed during a case brought against Sergey Shimovolos, the head of the Nizhny Novgorod Human Rights Society, in April 2009. At that time, prosecutors acknowledged that the authorities had begun compiling such lists in 2007 and that there were 3,865 Russian citizens on them by the end of that year.

All those on these lists, the prosecutors acknowledged, were subject to monitoring, and now, Borogan reveals, "their names are included on the very same electronic card files that include data on criminals who are at large and being sought" by law enforcement authorities, thus blurring an important distinction between law-abiding citizens and criminals.

Rights activists have called attention to this practice, having noticed that their colleagues who were seeking to travel to various social and political events, including protest marches, were sometimes stopped en route by the police and the FSB. The Nizhny case, which led to the conviction of Shimovolos, confirms what they have reported.

According to Borogan, the electronic database that now includes information on those suspected of "extremism" specifies how police officers are to respond when they come in contact with such citizens, even though the individuals on this list "are not suspected of having committed a crime."

In a second case in May 2009, For Human Rights Movement member Roman Dobrokhotov provided yet another confirmation of the existence of such black lists. He was stopped by officials from the MVD Department for Preventing Extremism while traveling from Volgograd to a meeting in Moscow.

Dobrokhotov's case also focused attention on yet another aspect of these lists: authorities' use of portable computers that feature not only names but also photographs of people the MVD suspects of "extremism," demonstrating the degree to which these "black lists" have become institutionalized.

But what is perhaps most discouraging, Borogan concludes, is that the authorities seem able to put anyone they want on these lists. Indeed, she points out, the courts appear to have declared the lists "absolutely legal" by acknowledging their existence.

In this respect, the situation in Russia is different than in many other countries, where, when officials do compile such lists and there is evidence of their existence, individuals appearing on them can appeal to the courts and force the authorities to justify what they have done or to remove their names from the list.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2009/06/02/moscow-broadens-definition-of-extremism-a35002