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New Russian Translation of Quran Proposed After 'Extremist' Ban

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The Council of Muftis of Russia has proposed to release a new Russian translation of the Quran two months after one of the most widely read translations of the holy book was banned.

Rushan Abbyasov, the deputy head of the Council of Muftis of Russia, announced that he would discuss the new translation project — a consolidation of both Russian and foreign theologians' interpretative translations of the holy book — at the 15th anniversary celebrations of Russia's Interreligious Council at Patriarch Kirill's official residence on Dec. 18.

The proposal seems to come in response to a two-month-old ruling by a Novorossiysk court to ban a decade-old Russian translation of the Quran under Article 282 of Russia's Criminal Code on the "incitement of national, racial, or religious enmity." The ban of the widely read text infuriated rights campaigners and Muslim communities across Russia, with clerics warning that the ruling came dangerously close to banning the Quran itself.

The ruling has been appealed by the lawyer of Azeri theologian Elmir Kuliyev, the translator of the holy book.

Abbyasov was one of many clerics to speak out against the ruling, warning in comments carried by Reuters that if the ban were upheld, "there will be unrest ... not only in Russia but all over the world. We are talking about the destruction of the Quran."

As for the new translation, Abbyasov denied that the Council of Muftis was proposing a combined publication of the Quran and the Bible, as Izvestia had previously reported.

"A translation of the Quran can only be initiated and edited by Muslim theologians, and a translation of the Bible must be managed by the Orthodox Church," Abbyasov said.

"There have been no proposals to jointly translate and publish the Quran and the Bible," he said.

In his speech at the 225th anniversary of the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia in October, President Vladimir Putin highlighted the importance of "solving the problems related to the translation of Muslim theological and popular publications into Russian" and admitted that bans on literature "work poorly or have an adverse effect."

Russia's 2002 anti-extremism law, which legally justifies banning "extremist" literature, was adopted in the hope of curbing militancy and radicalism. Since its adoption, the Justice Ministry has banned 2,142 publications, including "The Garden of the Righteous," a compilation of verses from the Quran and Hadith.

Despite certain unchallenged additions to the list of "extremist materials" — such as Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf" — the all-encompassing provisions of Russia's anti-extremism law can sometimes be too broad, according to Alexander Verkhovsky, director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis.

"Russia's anti-extremism law is both meant to fight extremism and to keep everything under control from above," Verkhovsky said in a telephone interview. "But we have to ask ourselves, 'What is extremism?' Many things can fall under this category."

Critics of the anti-extremism law say certain provisions of the law have periodically been used to stifle dissenting voices, including those of Pussy Riot, the female punk rock group that performed a "punk prayer" in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral in February 2012.

Critics also say the law is often used arbitrarily by prosecutors.

"There is no special reasoning behind the ban on [Kuliyev's] translation of the Quran," Verkhovsky said. "There is no real way of understanding why this version was chosen and not another publication. Prosecutors just pick something that could seem dangerous to them."

The Quran has not been the only target of Russia's recent bans on "extremist" literature.

In November, Kurbangali Sharipov, the senior assistant prosecutor of the Stravropol region, demanded that local schools dispose of Sergei Yesenin's "hooligan poems" and Vladimir Nabokov's novels, claiming that they breed crime and frighten children. Sharipov was later

relieved of his duties.

"Russia is trying to fight extremism in all its forms," said Yevgeny Satanovsky, president of the Moscow-based Institute of the Middle East, in a telephone interview. "A simple solution is to liquidate literature."

"In some places, books about Darwinism are forbidden. In other places, you cannot read anything by Karl Marx. And in Stravropol, they want to ban 'Lolita' and Yesenin's poems. Why would anyone expect Russia to act less idiotically than the rest of the world?"

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