

Missing Moscow Woman Believed to Have Joined Islamic State

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Student Varvara Karaulova, 19.

A 19-year-old Muscovite student has run away to Turkey in an apparent attempt to join the ranks of the Islamic State terrorist organization in neighboring Syria, her father told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

Varvara Karaulova, a second-year student of philosophy at the city's prestigious Moscow State University, left Moscow on a one-way ticket to Istanbul last Wednesday. Pavel Karaulov, her father, says his daughter left the apartment she shared with her mother in the middle of the day and gave no indication that she would not be home for dinner that night.

The student, whom her father described as an introvert, was last seen at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport and is thought to have gone from there to join a terrorist group in neighboring Syria or Libya. Her current whereabouts are unknown.

Karaulova's mobile phone was last traced to a location near the Turkish border with Syria, according to an unnamed source in Russian law enforcement cited by the Gazeta.ru news site Monday.

The student's disappearance comes in the wake of numerous reports that a number of teenage girls from other countries, including Britain, France and Germany, have joined the Islamic State. The story of the philosophy student represents the first high-profile suspected Islamic State recruitment case in the Russian capital.

Karaulova's parents filed a missing persons report with the Moscow police last Thursday, never dreaming that their daughter could have headed for the Islamic State, a terrorist organization that has gained control of large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, leaving a trail of shocking executions in its wake. Karaulov said he had not noticed any suspicious behavior in his daughter, who had been baptized into the Russian Orthodox Church, but said he had learned from her classmates since her disappearance that she had been wearing traditional Islamic clothing at the university, apparently changing her clothes after leaving her Moscow apartment.

The press attache of the Russian Consulate General in Istanbul, Andrei Yegorov, told The Moscow Times that Russia's diplomatic representation in Turkey was using "all methods" available to find Karaulova, but declined to elaborate on the details of the search operation.

Yegorov also refused to speculate on the objective of Karaulova's trip to Turkey, but said that information about it could emerge in the future.

A Broken Chain

Karaulova was brought up in the Russian Orthodox faith, according to her father, and wore a cross around her neck until recently.

Karaulov said he noticed in mid-April that his daughter was not wearing the religious pendant that had always hung around her neck.

"She told me the chain had broken," Karaulov told The Moscow Times in a telephone interview on Tuesday, his voice breaking. "I told her we would have it fixed."

The philosophy student was interested in Arabic studies and read extensively on the topic, according to Karaulov. She had started learning Arabic in September. As part of her degree, Karaulova studied world religions.

"She read about Islam," Karaulov said. "But she also read about Russian Orthodoxy and other religions. It was part of her program. I didn't think anything of it."

A representative of Moscow State University's philosophy faculty said they were unable to comment on the missing student on Tuesday.

Karaulov, who plans to travel to Istanbul to assist in the search for his daughter, said he did not know how she had obtained the necessary funds to pay for her trip to Turkey.

He said at the time of her disappearance, he did not even know his daughter had valid travel documents, but subsequently learned through personal connections at the Foreign Ministry and the Federal Security Service (FSB) that his daughter had applied for and received an international passport.

No Trend

Russian media speculated this week that Karaulova could have been lured into abruptly abandoning her studies in Moscow by romantic promises of marriage from a radical Islamic fighter she could have met on the Internet.

Karaulov made no mention of this theory in Tuesday's phone interview. Last week, he wrote on his Facebook page that his daughter must have been under "serious mental pressure" from extremists.

Alexander Verkhovsky, head of the SOVA Center, a Moscow-based think tank specialized in extremism, said that teenage girls did not necessarily need to become enamored with a radical to join an extremist group. He said that conversions with a romantic aspect are in fact a rarity and that the roots of terrorist recruitment in Russia stretched far beyond the recent media coverage.

"Recruitment by terrorist groups in Russia did not begin with the emergence of the Islamic State," said Verkhovsky. "I would not say that it has increased in Russia with the Islamic State. The phenomenon was already present in the North Caucasus," home to several impoverished, restive and predominantly Muslim regions.

Alexei Malashenko, chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center's religion, society and security program, said it was too early to conclude that Karaulova's case was part of a broader trend of Russian teenagers being recruited to join the Islamic State.

"We know that men from [the Russian republics of] Chechnya and Dagestan, as well as [former Soviet state] Tajikistan are fighting alongside the Islamic State," Malashenko said. "But we don't know what the women who reportedly head to join the organization actually do. There is no information coming from the other side. In two or three weeks, if a similar case [to that of Karaulova] occurs, then we could start pondering whether this is becoming a trend."

Southern Precedents

Although Karaulova is the first Moscow woman reported to have left for Syria, there have been a handful of recent cases in which teenage girls from Russia's North Caucasus have reportedly become ensnared in international terrorism.

Petimat Oisayeva, an 18-year-old Chechen, was detained in the southern Russian city of Nalchik in April as she was heading to Syria to join her Chechen fiancé, who had been fighting alongside an unidentified militant group there, Russian media reported at the time.

In January, 18-year-old Diana Ramazova, a native of Russia's restive republic of Dagestan, carried out a suicide bombing outside a police station in central Istanbul, killing one policeman. She had reportedly married an Islamic State militant who was killed in Syria.

in December 2014.

Syria's ambassador to Moscow, Riad Haddad, said in December 2013 that some 1,700 Chechens were fighting in his country, the Kavkazsky Uzel (Caucasian Knot) news site reported. That figure was significantly higher than an estimate made in May 2014 by FSB head Alexander Bortnikov, who said that some 200 Russians had joined armed groups in Syria.

In March, the Kremlin's envoy for the North Caucasus, Sergei Melikov, said that about 1,500 people from Russia's North Caucasus region were fighting alongside the Islamic State and other militant groups in Syria and Iraq.

Individuals suspected of financing or preparing to join the Islamic State have faced criminal charges in Russia. The Interior Ministry's anti-extremism department said in March that criminal cases had been opened against 300 people suspected of having joined terrorist organizations abroad.

Individuals found guilty of participating in foreign armed conflicts face up to 10 years behind bars under Russian law.

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