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Russian Yoga Lecturer Escapes Penalty in Sign of Good Karma

January 18, 2017



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Russia's yoga lovers can sigh in relief today, following a judge's decision in St. Petersburg to throw out the case against Dmitry Ugai, a man tied to a Krishna group charged with illegal missionary work for lecturing on the spiritual roots of yoga.

"The case is closed due to the absence of any administrative offense," the court ruled, according to the Interfax news agency.

Ugai was detained at the spiritual "Vedalife" festival in October after giving a lecture in which he said that yoga "was more than just a series of exercises" and was "rooted in religion."

He was taken to a police station and held for several hours with no explanation before being told to sign a blank confession, he told The Moscow Times earlier.

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In an effort to crack down on Salafist extremism in Russia, recent legislative reforms included new restrictions on “missionary activity,” amending the legal definition of the term as defined under the Russian Constitution's article on the freedom of conscience and religion. Now, missionary activity in Russia is off limits to anyone but the representatives of registered organizations and groups, and individuals who have entered into formal agreements with such bodies.

The reforms were sold as a counterterrorism measure, but analysts say it has mostly been used to crack down on religious minorities.

In a post on his VKontakte page, the Russian version of Facebook, ahead of the court hearing on Wednesday, Ugai said it was important to win the case "on behalf of all those who are full of fear and apathy, who are afraid of being taken to court for practising meditation, vegetarianism. [Those who] tremble over books with Indian names and expect retaliation for their belief in Karma and reincarnation."

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