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Russian Cult Leader Nabbed in Argentine Human-Trafficking Swoop

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Konstantin Rudnev, leader of Ashram Shambala.

Argentine authorities have dismantled a notorious Russian cult, arresting 14 individuals in a joint operation across two airports that has exposed a sinister network of alleged human exploitation.

Konstantin Rudnev, the 57-year-old founder of the Ashram Shambhala sect, was intercepted alongside his followers at airports in Bariloche and Buenos Aires on March 31 while heading to Brazil.

The investigation began when a young Russian woman arrived at a hospital in Bariloche to give birth, raising immediate concerns among medical staff.

Doctors were alarmed by the woman's condition and the behavior of her accompanying companions. The 22-year-old appeared severely malnourished and visibly frightened, with the two women accompanying her preventing her from speaking. This prompted an immediate police investigation that would unravel a complex web of alleged criminal activity.

“Her passport said she was 22, but if she's even 15, that's too old,” a detective told Infobae.

Rudnev, who describes himself as an “alien from the star Sirius,” has a long history of criminal behavior. A former Soviet soldier who was hospitalized after a psychiatric episode in the mid-1980s, he founded the sect in Novosibirsk in 1989. At its peak in the 1990s, the organization claimed over 20,000 acolytes across 18 Russian regions.

The sect's operations were deeply manipulative. Followers were required to donate their property, abandon their families and submit to Rudnev's extreme control mechanisms. Women were reportedly coerced into sexual relations, while men were mandated to remain celibate. The group's income mainly came from selling recordings of ritualistic encounters and charging exorbitant fees for yoga and meditation courses.

When arrested, the group was found in possession of 130 tablets containing cocaine, 12 cellphones, 10 SIM cards, a satellite phone and $15,000 in cash. According to El Pais, Rudnev attempted to slit his own throat during the arrest but police intervened.

Rudnev's previous legal troubles include an 11-year prison sentence in 2013 for rape, drug trafficking and organizing a group engaged in violence.

“Rudnev's cult members often lost their money and property and abandoned their relatives and friends, and many of them were reported missing,” reported The Siberian Times, as quoted by The Daily Mail in 2013.

“After joining up, females were forced to take part in ‘ritual rapes’ and orgies with Rudnov and other cult leaders,” a Novosibirsk court heard.

After his release in 2021, Rudnev moved to Montenegro, where he was previously detained for filming what police described as “ritual pornography.”

Religious scholar Alexander Neveev, speaking to Russian outlet 360.ru, described the organization as a “very dangerous pseudo-tantric group,” noting its extreme practices included ritual violence and a perverse interpretation of spiritual practices.

The cult lured new members through social media, promising financial prosperity and personal happiness through “women's practices” and pseudo-spiritual manipulation.

The women found with Rudnev in Argentina were severely emaciated, with patches of baldness — a potential indication of prolonged malnutrition and psychological control. Authorities are now investigating whether the women are victims of human trafficking or willing participants in the cult's activities.

The case has been referred to the Federal Prosecutor's Office in Bariloche, with charges likely to include human trafficking, sexual exploitation and drug offenses. A preliminary hearing is expected in the coming days to determine the legal status of the remaining detainees.

As the investigation continues, questions remain about the full extent of the Ashram Shambala sect's operations and the potential number of victims left in its wake.

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