

RUSSIA: Orthodox Christian Anti-Cult Activist Accused of Targeting, Harassing Leading Hindu Guru

By Cristina Maza

News Week (06.02.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2C1WJar> – Popular Hindu religious leader Shri Prakash Ji said his life in Russia drastically worsened during the past three years due to systematic harassment and threats from followers of an Orthodox Christian anti-cult activist.

Shri, who goes by the name Guru Ji, had been living peacefully in Russia since 1990, first as a medical student and then as a spiritual leader. He started a family in Russia and his three children, who are between the ages of 18 and 23, were all born in Moscow.

But three years ago, he caught the attention of anti-cult activist Alexander Dvorkin, a man human rights groups said harasses members of any religion that competes with Russia's Orthodox Church. Ever since, Guru Ji said he and his family have been the targets of a smear campaign that culminated in November, when police raided his spiritual center and his home.

“They searched the center, and they searched my home, where my

family was. They are sending fake journalists to my office. People come to me, they pretend to be a follower, and then they film me. Every week they are doing something," Guru Ji told Newsweek.

"I'm starting to wonder how I can live here with my family. There are so many nationalist elements here, and my daughter is going to school, every day we are worried. They call and threaten us, they say I should leave Russia," he continued.

Guru Ji's lawyer, Kaloy Akhilgov, said Dvorkin's followers have filed false statements with the police saying that Guru Ji is guilty of economic crimes. So far, no charges have been pressed.

Guru Ji said that every day hundreds of people visit his spiritual center, which is located approximately 17 miles outside of Moscow. Yoga and meditation have experienced a cultural revival in Russia, just as they have in many parts of the West.

In Russia, Orthodox Christianity has fused with Russian nationalism under the watchful eye of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In this context, religious activists like Dvorkin have risen to positions of prominence. In 2009, the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom's annual report noted that Dvorkin had been named the chairman of a new government-linked body called the Expert Religious Studies Council, which was given wide powers

to investigate religious organizations in Russia.

“The Expert Religious Studies Council’s new chairman, Alexander Dvorkin, is Russia’s most prominent anti-cult activist, and he lacks academic credentials as a religion specialist,” the report notes. “Observers are concerned that under Dvorkin’s leadership, the council may call for the closure of registered as well as unregistered minority religious communities.”

The council maintains close ties to the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is also known for its anti-sect activities. Many in Russia say that Dvorkin and his associates have a long track record of targeting religious minorities and have a well-established network of followers and collaborators in governmental and nongovernmental structures throughout Russia.

“Religious freedom in Russia is in a dire state, and we’re concerned about the status of all religious minorities there,” Daniel Mark, chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Freedom, told Newsweek.

“Alexander Dvorkin is one of a large network of Russian Orthodox activists who have grown considerably in influence over the last 10 years due to the Russian government’s increasing patronage of the Russian Orthodox Church and the government’s Soviet-style concerns about the subversive potential of independent religious groups. These concerns are no justification for violations of religious freedom,” Mark continued.

Dvorkin insists that Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Guru Ji are spreading false rumors about him. Dvorkin told Newsweek that he is now the deputy head of the council, whose only role is to advise the Ministry of Justice about which groups should be permitted to register as a religious organization. He denies persecuting religious minorities.

Over the past decade, however, the council has spearheaded campaigns against Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientologists in Russia. Last year, Russia opted to ban Jehovah's Witnesses altogether, a decision Dvorkin defended. Jehovah's Witnesses are now labeled an extremist group in Russia and are prohibited from gathering or preaching in the country.

In 2017, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Minorities recommended for the first time that Russia be included on the list of countries of particular concern. The State Department later declined to include Russia on the list.

"In mainland Russia in 2016, new laws effectively criminalized all private religious speech not sanctioned by the state, the Jehovah's Witnesses stand on the verge of a nationwide ban, and innocent Muslims were tried on fabricated charges of terrorism and extremism," the 2017 report stated.

Hare Krishnas in Russia have also been accused of being a "totalitarian sect." Plans in 2003 to build a Hindu temple for Hari Krishnas and members of the Vedic religions were derailed by members of the Orthodox Christian Church, who called Hinduism one of the most anti-Christian cults. According to

the Indian embassy in Russia, there are around 14,000 Indian citizens living in Russia and around 1,500 Afghan nationals of Indian origin.

Now, Dvorkin's supporters have set their sights on Guru Ji. Dvorkin's blog, which is popular among conservative Orthodox Christians in Russia, claims that Guru Ji is not a real spiritual leader and that he tricks followers in order to take advantage of them and steal their money. The forum also contains testimony from people who claim that they once followed Guru Ji and experienced abuse. One user claimed Guru Ji is turning women against their husbands because his female followers are now only interested in men who are enlightened.

Guru Ji and members of his family said that the harassment has become intolerable as a result of the campaign. Experts contend that Dvorkin is not overtly dangerous, but that he and his followers have a habit of using law enforcement to fight their battles.

"Dvorkin is a very emotional person. In previous years, he could even turn violent in his anti-cultist fight. But he is not a fighter, in fact he was not really brutal," Alexander Verkhovsky, director of Russian think tank the SOVA Center, told Newsweek.

"Physical attacks by some of [his followers] is still possible but is very rare. They prefer writing books and articles, collaborating with police, Church leadership and other authorities," Verkhovsky continued. "So usually these people threaten not with violence but with urging [the] law

enforcement system against their opponents.”

Guru Ji and his son believe that this is exactly what happened when their spiritual center and home were raided one Thursday last November.

“My mother was alone inside the house. She called me and said there were people outside the door, so I came running home from college,” Prasun Prakash, Guru Ji’s 23-year-old son, told Newsweek.

“There were these six big guys, two were in uniform. I asked them for documents, they showed me a piece of paper, so we let them in,” he continued.

The raid wasn’t violent, Prasun said. The men, only two of whom wore police uniforms, looked through the house, opening drawers. But one of the police officers said something that Prasun thought was strange.

“He kept saying, ‘This is a normal police raid, this is not Dvorkin,’” Prasun told Newsweek.

At the same time, a similar raid was taking place at Guru Ji’s spiritual center.

“Policemen went to our cultural center, they wanted to find

something criminal,” said Kristina Shurygina, an employee at Guru Ji’s spiritual center. Shurygina said that the policemen were generally friendly and polite. Russian media later reported that computers and documents were seized from the center due to suspicion of extremism.

The guru’s lawyer said that he believes the police are trying to launch a criminal case with little evidence.

“Initially, there were attempts to initiate a criminal case on extremism, but [they] found nothing,” Akhilgov told Newsweek, adding that there were no charges filed.

Guru Ji and his son Prasun decided to go to the local police to ask about the incident. They wanted to find out if the men who entered their home and spiritual center were authorized to do so.

But the police they encountered in the station weren’t nearly as genial as the ones who conducted the raids. Prasun told Newsweek that a police officer entered the room where he and his father were waiting and began screaming at them, saying that they don’t belong in Russia because they aren’t Orthodox Christians.

“Then he pushed me out of the room, using physical force,” Prasun said. “He said Russia is an Orthodox Christian country and foreign elements should be removed.”

Guru Ji recorded the incident on his cell phone and posted the recording on his Facebook page. He said that he pledged never to return to the police station without a lawyer present.

Following the incident, he made video appeals to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin, accusing Dvorkin of harassing his family.

Dvorkin, however, insists that he has not encouraged anyone to go after Guru Ji.

“I am a professor, I don’t have any followers,” Dvorkin told Newsweek. “I didn’t know about [Guru Ji] until three years ago when his former followers began writing on my forum and saying they had experienced abuse.”

Instead, he said that groups like Scientologists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and now Guru Ji have started a smear campaign against him.

“They’ve also said that I am a CIA agent and Mossad agent and KGB agent. But I’m the head of an NGO, Professor at the Orthodox University,” he told Newsweek.

But the harassment of Guru Ji and his family has received attention both in Russia and in India. In January last year, some of Guru Ji’s supporters in India staged a protest in front of the Russian embassy in Delhi.

Last June, Russian media reported that Guru Ji had traveled to India to meet with Vijay Kumar Singh, India's Minister of State for External Affairs. During the meeting, Singh said that Dvorkin should be investigated under international law for his harassment of Guru Ji.

Guru Ji also lodged a complaint with Russia's prosecutor general, a fact that was noted in Russian media. Valery Rashkin, a deputy of Russia's Communist Party in the Russian Duma, took up Guru Ji's cause and called for an inquiry, saying that Dvorkin's activities jeopardized Russia's relationship with India.

A roundtable on the issue was held in the Duma in December, when Guru Ji was invited to give a press conference.

Despite the attention, Guru Ji and his son Prasun do not believe that Dvorkin and his followers will stop harassing them. While they plan to continue to raise awareness about Dvorkin's persecution of religious minorities, they raised concerns that the system is rigged against them.

"If you have the will then you can change anything. This is what keeps me, my father, my family and our well-wishers going," Prasun said. "Otherwise we wouldn't have decided to fight this war for justice against the whole system."