

Memorial recognises Bagir Kazikhanov as a political prisoner, sentenced for reading the books of Said Nursi

Muslim from Ulyanovsk Bagir Kazikhanov was sentenced under part 1, article 282.2 of the Russian Criminal Code (Organising the activity of a banned religious society) to 3.5 years in a general-regime colony. According to the investigation and court, he created a cell of the religious society Nurdzhular, banned in Russia, in Ulyanovsk on the basis of studying Turkish theologian Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960), who expressed himself in a cycle of commentaries on the Koran “Risale-i Nur” (“Treatises of Light”).

Within the framework of this trial Alexander Melentyev and Stepan Kudryashov received suspended sentences under part 2, article 282.2 of the Russian Criminal Code (Participating in the activity of a banned religious society) – two years and one year and eight months respectively.

Kazikhanov has been in custody since April 10, 2014, in October 2014 he was transferred to house arrest, and after the sentence on February 25, 2015 he was again taken into custody. *“Memorial believes that the prosecution of followers of Said Nursi is exclusively connected with their religious convictions and non-violent use of their right to freedom of thought and conscience, and that the investigation’s claims about the creation by Kazikhanov of a cell of the banned extremist organisation Nurdzhular in Ulyanovsk are baseless.”*

Above all, to this day no evidence has been presented that this organisation exists anywhere in the world (and in Russia it was banned by a court). The word Nurdzhular means followers of Nursi, but they do not form a hierarchical organised community. The term is was also used by the Turkish authorities 70 years ago for a groundless prosecution of Nursi himself. Subsequently all charges against the theologian were dropped, and currently his books are recognised by official figures in Turkey as a valuable cultural legacy.

Evidence in favour of the existence of Nurdzhular, or in general in favour of the fact that Kazikhanov created any kind of extremist organisation, does not stand up to any criticism. The only convincing part of the case is the fact of collective reading of the books of Said Nursi, which does not amount to the incidence of a criminal act, even if distributing the texts is banned in Russia.

Fourteen translations of Nursi were banned by a decision of the Koptevsky district court of Moscow in 2007, but we find the arguments of the analyses on which the court bases itself to be absurd sometimes. In the religious literature the experts found a condemnation of sinners (and even self-condemnation of a repentant person) and the scaring of atheists – and on that basis came to the conclusion that the texts were extremist.

The Council of Muftis of Russia, the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Russia and the Sova information and analytical centre have said that the works of Nursi are harmless for society and do not contain propaganda of violence, and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom has called for the decision on banning them to be re-examined.

We do not find any reason to prosecute people who read, including collectively, the books of Said Nursi, apart from the desire of the law-enforcement bodies to create the illusion of a battle with organised extremism by inventing the extremism.

Memorial demands the immediate release of Bagir Kazikhanov and the rehabilitation of him and the other defendants in his case, and also an end to bans on religious literature that does not propagandise violence.

Recognising a person as a political prisoner does not mean that the Memorial human rights centre agrees with the views and statements of the person recognised as a political prisoner, or that it approves of their statements or actions.

More detail on the case of Bagir Kazikhanov can be read [here](#).