

Raid on Muslims in St. Petersburg

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On 8 February, Federal Security Service forces and special police units blocked off the Apraksin Dvor market halls in St. Petersburg, where an unofficial mosque was located. The official purpose of this large-scale action was to search for persons wanted in connection with an ongoing investigation into incitement to terrorism and religious hatred. Around 700 Muslims participating in Friday prayers had their documents checked, and 271 people were arrested, including citizens of Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as one Egyptian and one citizen of Afghanistan. About a dozen foreigners who had violated Russian migration laws were detained for deportation. The only arrestee named was Murat Sarbashev, a native of Kabardino-Balkaria in Russia's North Caucasus, who had allegedly posted extremist content on social networking sites.

Commentary

- According to press leaks, Sarbashev belonged to the extremist Muslim community Peterburgsky Jamaat; the raid also allegedly targeted emissaries recruiting young people to join terrorist training camps located in Arab states (the Investigative Committee refused to comment on this speculation). However, it is possible that these leaks came from the institutions of force, who may have been trying to explain the unimpressive results of the operation – only one person was arrested who had officially been on the 'wanted' list.
- It seems more likely that the action was the result of pressure put on the authorities by representatives of official Islam, who are disturbed by the increasing popularity of radical Salafism; the Mufti of St. Petersburg and North-West Russia discussed this recently with the presidential representative for this federal district. In addition, there are indications that there was a business subtext to the case. The day before the raid, the St. Petersburg city authorities decided not to renew an investment contract with Glavstroy SPb, a company which had planned to build a complex of hotels and business centres on the site of Apraksin Dvor, a 12-hectare area in the city centre where predominantly immigrants have been trading and living since the mid-1990s.
- Regardless of the real reasons, the spectacular nature of the raid (i.e. the scale of the operation and the way it was 'sold' in the media) met the expectations of ethnic Russians who are concerned about the rising number of immigrants, and see them as a security

risk. On top of the five million inhabitants of St. Petersburg, there are, according to estimates, up to one million non-residents (mainly from countries of the former USSR). Across Russia there may be at least ten million migrants, and according to the Federal Migration Service, there are 3.5 million illegal residents.

- Illegal migration is occasionally accompanied by Islamic radicalism, which is becoming a problem not only in the traditionally Muslim North Caucasus and the more secularised Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, but also in central Russia and Siberia. Fundamentalist ideas are gaining popularity there, particularly among immigrants uprooted from their communities, but also among groups of ethnic Russian youth. At this stage, it is difficult to estimate the number of followers of radical movements, but in the face of the trends outlined above, we may assume that it will grow.