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A Special Issue on Konstantin Rudnev and “Ashram Shambhala”: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT: The introduction to this special issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* situates the decade-long transnational persecution of Konstantin Rudnev and his school, generally referred to as “Ashram Shambhala,” within broader patterns of state, media, and anti-cult mobilization against new religious movements. It argues that authorities in Russia, Montenegro, and Argentina embraced the myth of the omniscient leader and the myth of the passive follower, narratives that erase individual agency and legitimize coercive state intervention. The essays collected here document how political interests, religious competition—particularly involving the Russian Orthodox Church—and sensationalist media converged to construct Rudnev as a dangerous “cult leader,” producing moral panics, flawed judicial processes, and severe violations of religious freedom. This introduction highlights the escalating crisis in Argentina, where Rudnev’s life is now at risk, and notes the growing involvement of international NGOs and UN bodies denouncing procedural abuses and fabricated evidence. By presenting detailed analyses of Rudnev’s life and teachings, and of the Russian, Montenegrin, and Argentine phases of the case, the issue underscores the fragility of spiritual liberty. It warns institutional actors worldwide against uncritical acceptance of anti-cult tropes that threaten minority religions and alternative spiritual experimentation.

KEYWORDS: Konstantin Rudnev, Ashram Shambhala, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Religious Liberty in Argentina, Media and New Religious Movements.

This formidable collection of papers focused on the decade-long international persecution saga of Konstantin Rudnev should give pause to political and judicial authorities in Russia, Montenegro, and Argentina who have pursued this charismatic leader and his followers so vigorously. Together, the papers represent an indictment of authorities in all three countries who have allowed themselves to be used by those who would attack newer expressions of religiosity that have developed in our contemporary, tumultuous world. The collection is also a warning to those in positions of influence and power in other societies to take great care not to be swept along by institutional forces intent on limiting activities of and participation in newer forms of spirituality and religiosity.

The special collection of papers focused on the tribulations of Rudnev also clearly demonstrates the injustices that can arise when the general public and

authorities, including legal authorities and judges, accept the pernicious “myth of the omniscient leader” and its necessary companion, “the myth of the passive follower” (Richardson 2021). In combination, those myths completely reject any concept of human agency, and many people in today’s world are actively seeking alternative beliefs, lifestyles, and a community in which to experiment with a way of living that fits their needs. I have reviewed elsewhere several studies clearly demonstrating that participants in new religious movements exercise agency and use the groups to change themselves, a clear refutation of the “brainwashing” ideas that undergird the myths of the omniscient leader and the passive follower (Richardson 1985).

The collection also reveals how easy it is for those opposed to experimentation in the religious and spiritual realm to manipulate mass media, political leaders, and others (such as parents) who are puzzled and upset that anyone, including especially their children, would want to reject the dominant culture and experiment with other lifestyles and belief systems. Thus, those opposed to newer forms of spirituality have found a ready audience and a “business plan” that works well to spread and implement their attack on any competition for the hearts and minds of those seeking alternative ways of living and believing (Shupe and Bromley 1980, 1994, whose findings have been updated by Introvigne 2022 and Šorytė 2024).

The situation in Argentina has ominous implications for Konstantin Rudnev, whose very life is now at stake. However, the circumstances and the way that the political and judicial situation has spiraled out of control there clearly demonstrate the precariousness of religious freedom and the right of individuals to experiment with different beliefs and lifestyles.

This tragic situation has attracted the attention of many NGOs around the world that promote and defend religious freedom, as well as that of several others. Letters have been written to political and legal authorities in Argentina, and various columns and articles have appeared, documenting the development of this very disturbing situation first in Russia, then in Montenegro, and now in Argentina. Examples of this outpouring of concern and the support for Rudnev, and for religious freedom, include the following:

1. Professor Cole Durham, well-known LDS scholar, advocate for religious freedom, and head of the G20 Interfaith Forum, sent a letter of concern to the Argentine President, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Security.

2. Italian scholar and attorney Massimo Introvigne has published a letter signed by 12 heads of international NGOs supportive of religious freedom, followed by others. The letter requesting humane treatment and justice for Konstantin Rudnev was also sent to the Argentine President, and to the Ministries of Justice and of Security (*Bitter Winter* 2026).

3. The case has been brought to the attention of the United Nations Human Rights Council (CAP-LC 2026a, 2026b) and Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (Duval 2026), and the World Conference on Religious Dialogue and Cooperation in Skopje, North Macedonia (Vardé 2026), as well as other groups and organizations.

4. Complaints have been lodged against the prosecutors in the case for falsification of evidence and procedural irregularities (*Infobae* 2026).

5. Various other articles and columns have been published concerning the situation in Argentina (see e.g., Introvigne 2026; Amicarelli 2026).

This special issue, offering much detail and history of the events surrounding Rudnev, is now available, and we now turn to the individual articles.

The Articles

This collection of impressive scholarly productions opens first with Massimo Introvigne, noted NRM scholar and legal authority, who is well-informed about this and many other conflicts over nontraditional religions and spiritualities around the world. Introvigne uses interviews with Rudnev's brother and wife, along with considerable documentation he has gathered, to describe Rudnev's early life and how his school of thought developed during his younger years. The picture that emerges from this in-depth attention to his early years is one of a spiritual seeker trying to find a workable philosophy of life. That image differs greatly from the one constructed by Russian authorities, often influenced by the Russian Orthodox Church, the anti-cult movement, and the mass media in Russia. Those entities were all willing to promote a social construction of Rudnev as an "evil cult leader," especially as his ideas spread and he gained many followers in Russia and in several other countries. The amount of negative publicity associated with Rudnev's trial in Russia is a classic illustration of the manufacture of a "moral panic" (Richardson and Introvigne 2007). The ensuing panic led to Rudnev being incarcerated for

eleven years in Russia and then harassed for years after release, with eventual reincarceration in Argentina.

Introvigne’s opening is followed by French scholar Patricia Duval’s excellent analysis of the political and legal processes in Russia, where Rudnev’s “Ashram Shambhala” (as his movement became known) was persecuted within the Russian legal system, leading to its ban and Rudnev’s eleven-year imprisonment. Duval offers details using court files, police reports, and media materials that demonstrate the political nature of the prosecution, which was actively supported by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The eventual conviction of Rudnev was not based on factual evidence but relied on uncorroborated testimony and the use of discredited concepts such as “brainwashing.” No independent expertise was brought in to counter the narrative developed by the ROC and Russian authorities, thus resulting in an unjust but predictable outcome. This was another example of the “telephone justice” administered in Russia when religious minorities are involved (Shterin and Richardson 2002).

Alessandro Amicarelli’s contribution reports in detail how the events described by Introvigne were transfused into Montenegrin public life and law enforcement processes after Rudnev fled Russia and sought asylum there. A series of unrelated events and very biased and misleading reports from Russia were melded together by authorities and the mass media during the two years Rudnev resided there. Russian accusations were treated as factual along with fabricated (by the media) charges of Rudnev being a leader of a “sex cult.” This social construction was used to harass Rudnev and threaten him with incarceration again. No criminal proceedings were ever brought against him in Montenegro. Still, his case illustrates how reports of allegedly illegal behavior, coupled with media naivety and willingness to be used for nefarious purposes, can subvert the asylum process and lead to completely erroneous public perceptions. Amicarelli’s report also demonstrates risks faced by dissidents in nations unable or unwilling to withstand pressures from external influence from powerful nations such as Russia.

Argentine legal anthropologist María Vardé’s contribution describes the way that a simple hospitalization in a town in Argentina eventually led to charges of human trafficking against Rudnev. She uses various judicial records and media coverage, along with interviews of key players, to document how media reports of that hospital stay eventually were transmuted into accounts of a transnational trafficking organization that also involved narcotics and slave labor. Russian and

Montenegrin very dubious reports were used to build a case that led to the arrest and new incarceration of Rudnev in Argentina. Anti-cult narratives and prefabricated reports promulgated by mass media were accepted by Argentine authorities, including within the justice system. These circumstances made it impossible to mount an effective defense, thus facilitating a major miscarriage of justice and the imprisonment of a very ill Konstantin Rudnev.

There have been similar cases involving new religious movements in Argentina. An earlier example of a miscarriage of justice involved The Family International/Children of God. In that case, the judicial system removed a quite biased judge, and the movement was fully exonerated, but only after two years of turmoil and many consequences, such as some mothers being separated from their children and spending months incarcerated (Borowik 2014; Wright and Palmer 2016, 73–98).

Hungarian scholar Márk Nemes and Polish scholar Karolina Maria Kotkowska present separate articles, both of which offer an analysis of Rudnev's complex teachings, which are rooted in his prior experiences with various schools of thought in contemporary esotericism, New Age, and shamanistic practices. His ideas are best understood as, according to Nemes, a "complex system of religious bricolage oriented toward self-improvement and the elevation of consciousness." And, as both writers note, the essential role played by Tantric practices has become a lightning rod for many critics seeking to limit the impact of Rudnev's teachings. Nemes' and Kotkowska's works suggest that the lack of an adequate background hinders many who seek to understand Rudnev's approach and the elements that make up his eclectic perspective. Some who should know better have deliberately mischaracterized what Rudnev believes and practices for ulterior motives of control and even suppression. And those efforts have led directly to the legal harassment and the incarcerations that Rudnev has endured.

Well-known Canadian sociologist Susan J. Palmer analyzes the experiences of five advanced students of Konstantin Rudnev whom she interviewed recently via Zoom. She also was able to secure written answers to questions directed to Rudnev himself, a remarkable feat (and a demonstration of Palmer's tenacity that has made her a leading researcher in her field). Information she gathered offers an understanding of the attraction of the movement headed by Rudnev and the consequences of its demise when the community was raided in 2010, with Rudnev's subsequent imprisonment. She offers information on the background

and experiences of those interviewed and reasons why they were attracted to and became followers of Rudnev. They clearly were seeking more meaning in their lives and found that meaning with the charismatic Rudnev. Palmer then describes what has happened to those five followers since Rudnev’s incarceration, revealing that they are still followers of his teachings even if they have not had contact with or guidance from him since those early days with the first community in Siberia.

Belgium human rights and religious freedom activist and scholar Willy Fautré offers an in-depth discussion of the actions of the Russian Orthodox Church and particularly to role played by ROC functionary Alexander Dvorkin in the harassment visited upon Konstantin Rudnev. Those efforts eventually led to his long incarceration in Russia, as well as major repercussions internationally. Fautré details the growth of ties between the ROC and the Russia governmental apparatus, which played a crucial role in promoting the concept of “spiritual security” that came to dominate governmental policy toward all potential competitors of the ROC. This confluence of interests contributed to the dramatic changes of law related to minority faiths in Russia, which Fautré details. The misuse of the legal and judicial apparatus of government is documented, including full acceptance of the discredited concept of “brainwashing” in proceedings involving Rudnev as well as other minority faiths. The efforts to define Rudnev in totally negative terms have, as Fautré notes, been disseminated elsewhere to major effects in Montenegro and now Argentina as well.

Former Lithuanian diplomat and humanitarian advocate Rosita Šorytė details the social construction of the image of Konstantin Rudnev in the general public and in official proceedings in Russia, and how this contributed to his treatment throughout the persecution saga there. She offers a systematic analysis of the ways that Rudnev and his movement were criticized and attacked. She gives details about the media treatments of his eclectic philosophical and religious ideas, and how the interpretations of that image and various fabricated claims contributed to how he and his movement were dealt with by officialdom and the mass media in Russia. Šorytė notes that “the Russian media’s role is not to question but to amplify,” by which she means that the mass media in Russia are but a mouthpiece for the political and religious (ROC) establishments. However, she also points out that even more objective media outlets in Russia voiced the party line on Rudnev, republishing without critique officially sanctioned false or exaggerated reports. She laments how pervasive negative images of movements such as Rudnev’s can

become, and the consequences that derive from such an unfettered acceptance of such tropes.

Marco Respinti, Director-in-Charge of *Bitter Winter*, offers an analysis of journalistic practices concerning so-called “cults” with a special focus on how information on Rudnev was conveyed around the world. He dissects vivid examples of shoddy and unethical “yellow journalism” printed as truth in the Rudnev case, offering details about how individuals and groups dispensed wrong and misleading information, as well as how such slander was circulated internationally. He is quite critical of practices that had journalists treating questionable information received as accurate and factual when it clearly was not. He details the very serious consequences of what happened in Rudnev’s situation, whose imprisonment for years in Russia and now in Argentina has resulted in the rapid deterioration of his health. Respinti uses the Rudnev case to indict the journalists and groups involved in this tragic episode and implies that the entire profession of journalism should take note, learn from what has happened, and develop practices to counter such tendencies.

Concluding Comment

It is hoped that this impressive collection can be circulated widely, especially to institutional leaders in Argentina where Konstantin Rudnev’s life is in serious jeopardy. But this tragic saga also needs to be understood in many other societies where efforts might be made to limit spiritual experimentation by those seeking an alternative set of beliefs and a more meaningful lifestyle than is currently available to them. If that can occur, then the efforts made by all who have made this convincing collection possible will not have been wasted.

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Konstantin Rudnev Before the Arrest in 2010: A Spiritual Biography

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ABSTRACT: Konstantin Rudnev’s early biography reveals a trajectory far removed from the stereotype later imposed on him by prosecutors and media. Raised in late-Soviet Novosibirsk under the spiritual influence of a grandmother who had survived Stalinist repression, Rudnev developed from adolescence a sustained inner search shaped by social marginalization, early encounters with yoga, and a transformative esoteric experience in 1987. His system, emerging in the late 1980s and 1990s, centered on self-observation, the transformation of thought, and the cultivation of attention, drawing selectively on Eastern traditions and resonating with aspects of Gurdjieff’s psychology while remaining distinct and practical. Discreet teachings on sexual energy, rooted in classical Tantra, were later sensationalized by opponents. As his groups expanded across Russia and abroad, Rudnev’s visibility attracted hostility from the Orthodox Church, anti-cult activists, and the media, which constructed the “cult leader” narrative that overshadowed his documented spiritual development. Reconstructing this period demonstrates the profound gap between the biographical evidence and the public myth later used to justify repression.

KEYWORDS: Konstantin Rudnev, Ashram Shambhala, Yoga in Russia, Esotericism in Russia, Tantra.

Introduction

In the courtroom in Novosibirsk, where he was tried and sentenced in 2013, and in the prosecutors’ press releases circulated in Argentina after his arrest there in 2025, Konstantin Rudnev appears as a familiar figure in contemporary moral panic. He is described as a manipulator who invented a pseudo-spiritual movement to deceive followers, enrich himself, and satisfy his desires. This portrait has been repeated so often that it has acquired the solidity of a public myth.

Yet when one examines Rudnev’s early life, a different story emerges. It is a story that does not resemble the caricature of a con man but the trajectory of a young spiritual seeker who, from adolescence onward, pursued a sincere and idiosyncratic search. The contrast between these two narratives is essential for understanding how the image of Rudnev was constructed and why it diverges so radically from the biographical evidence.

Rudnev: The Early Years

Konstantin Rudnev (whose biography is reconstructed here based on interviews with his wife and brother and the documents they supplied to me) was born in Novosibirsk on August 4, 1967, into a family that embodied the contradictions of late Soviet life. Communist ideals nominally shaped the household, yet it lacked the ideological fervor that characterized other families of the period. The central figure in his upbringing was not his parents but his grandmother, a Muscovite who had survived Stalinist repression and was exiled to Siberia after the Second World War. Her presence introduced a dimension into the family that Soviet ideology could not erase. She was a deeply religious woman whose faith had endured persecution, displacement, and the loss of her home. For Konstantin and his brother, she represented a world that existed beyond the narrow horizon of official doctrine. Her apartment became the true center of family life, a place where the boys encountered a form of wisdom that did not depend on slogans or political loyalty.

This early exposure to a spiritual sensibility outside the Soviet norm shaped Rudnev's inner world. Yet his childhood was also marked by social difficulties. His brother recalls that Konstantin struggled to communicate with peers and was often bullied. These experiences produced in him a sense of imperfection and a desire for transformation. He began to believe that suffering was a sign that something in him needed to change. This conviction did not lead him toward cynicism but toward introspection. He became determined to understand why people behave as they do and how one might rise above the cruelty that children can inflict on one another.

The Soviet Union of the 1970s and early 1980s offered few resources for such a quest. Information outside the ideological framework was scarce. Yet two magazines, *Fizkultura i Sport* and *Nauka i Religiya*, occasionally published articles on yoga and Eastern philosophy. When Konstantin was about fifteen, his brother showed him one of these articles. It was a moment that altered the course of his life. The two boys began practicing yoga at home, without teachers or formal guidance. They trained their bodies and read whatever spiritual literature they could find. Konstantin absorbed these materials with unusual intensity. He did not simply imitate what he read. He processed it, reflected on it, and drew his own conclusions. His brother describes this period as the beginning of an independent spiritual synthesis.

In 1987, the brothers met a man whom they regarded as highly advanced in esoteric knowledge. The encounter produced what Konstantin later called an opening of consciousness. He felt that he had glimpsed truths that others could not see. This experience did not lead him to withdraw from the world. It led him to believe that he had a responsibility to share what he had understood. He became convinced that he possessed knowledge that could help others overcome suffering and confusion.

The years of Perestroika created new possibilities. Religious groups that had been suppressed or marginalized began to operate more openly. The brothers visited Adventists and Baptists. They did not join these communities, yet Konstantin was impressed by the devotion he observed. He saw that people could commit themselves fully to ideas that gave their lives meaning. This observation would later influence his own teaching. He believed that spiritual development required dedication and loyalty to a path.

A Traumatic Encounter with the Army

After finishing school, Konstantin entered compulsory military service. The Soviet army of that era was notorious for hazing. “Dedovshchina” was a system of violence that shaped the lives of countless young men. It was not an occasional abuse but a daily reality. Older soldiers beat younger ones, humiliated them, and subjected them to psychological torment. In some cases, recruits were raped. Suicides were not rare. Families often tried to prevent their sons from serving, and those who succeeded were considered fortunate.

Konstantin witnessed an incident in which a young recruit was beaten and raped before attempting suicide by slitting his wrists. This event had a profound impact on him. He concluded that remaining in the army would destroy him. Many young men of his generation reached similar conclusions. One of the few ways to escape service was to feign mental illness. Konstantin chose this path. He presented symptoms that led to psychiatric hospitalization and discharge. Prosecutors later used this episode to suggest underlying pathology. His family insists that it was a rational act of self-preservation. The psychiatric record reflects the brutality of the Soviet military system rather than any inherent instability.

Becoming a Yoga Teacher

When he left the army and the hospital in 1987, Konstantin returned to yoga with renewed determination. He began teaching small groups. At first, the practice was limited to hatha yoga, yet he soon realized that physical exercises were only an entry point. He felt a strong inner impulse to teach. He believed that he had knowledge that could help people understand themselves and transform their lives. His brother describes him as a young man who had already developed a coherent worldview and who was capable of debating mature scholars on spiritual matters.

Konstantin's system was eclectic. He read Carlos Castaneda (1925–1998) and incorporated elements of shamanism. He experimented with practices taught by Valery Averyanov, including “astral karate” (see Panin 2019). He believed that all religions shared a common essence and that spiritual truth could be expressed in many forms. His approach was not academic but experiential. He encouraged students to observe their thoughts, emotions, and reactions. He taught that suffering arises from incorrect thinking and that spiritual development begins with the transformation of thought.

This teaching emerged gradually. It did not appear fully formed in 1989 (a more recent formulation, on which this paragraph is based, is on Darshan[s] n.d.; see also *Spiritual Healing—Wisdom of Tibet* n.d.) It developed through conversations with students, through attempts to explain why people suffer, and through the practical work of examining thoughts. He insisted that human beings live under the influence of patterns of thought that they did not choose. Society, family, school, and culture instill in the mind evaluations and reactions that become automatic. These patterns generate suffering. They form what he called the false personality. The true self, in his view, is the observer, the attention that can witness thoughts, emotions, and bodily states.

He explained this in simple terms. If I can observe the body, then I am not the body. If I can observe emotions, then I am not emotions. If I can observe thoughts, then I am not thoughts. The question then becomes: who is the one who observes? He answered that this is attention. Where attention is directed, there the person “is” in that moment. Where attention is not, for that person, it does not exist. This was not presented as a metaphysical doctrine but as something that could be verified in practice.

Rudnev insisted that, for most people, the first obstacle on any spiritual path is incorrect thinking. When one sits down to meditate, the mind is immediately filled with habitual thoughts: resentments, fears, fantasies, grievances. The person forgets any abstract teaching about consciousness and is captured by these thoughts. For this reason, he believed that the first stage of inner work must be the transformation of thinking.

He used everyday examples. Someone calls me a fool. I feel offended. I suffer. The suffering does not come from the word itself. It comes from the evaluation that being called a fool is something terrible. This evaluation was installed in childhood. It is a pattern. If I examine it and change it, the offense disappears. I discover that the thought was producing the suffering. This discovery is not theoretical. It is experiential. It shows that thoughts can be changed and that the one who changes them is not identical with them.

Rudnev explained that this work with thinking is also the most realistic starting point because it concerns what already occupies the person's attention. Offense, jealousy, fear, and envy demand a response. By bringing awareness into this process, the person begins to govern himself. He sees that he can replace one thought with another. He sees that he can change his reactions. He sees that his mind is composed of parts that can be observed and transformed.

As the person works with thoughts, the spiritual part becomes stronger. It acquires the capacity to direct attention, to change focus, to hold a position instead of being swept away. Through hundreds of such small transformations, the spiritual part grows. It becomes capable of more sustained attention. It becomes capable of observing without immediate reaction.

He accepted that more advanced stages exist. He referred to the classical sequence of concentration, meditation, and higher states, as in Patanjali's yoga. Yet he insisted that these stages cannot be reached by someone who has not first worked through the basic repertoire of incorrect thoughts. If a person is constantly offended, jealous, fearful, and resentful, any attempt to "be here and now" will be overwhelmed by these reactions.

He used the image of an egg to describe a person's structure. The shell is the false personality, composed of roles, masks, and habitual thoughts. The center is the true self. Each incorrect thought is connected to a part of the personality. By working through these thoughts, the person gradually breaks the shell.

He separates himself from the masks. He says, “This is not me.” If he can change it, then it is not his essence. The essence, in his view, is unchanging because it is a part of the divine.

A Conversation with Gurdjieff

As Rudnev’s teaching matured in the early 1990s, he began to articulate more clearly the distinction between the true self and the patterns of thought that dominate ordinary life. This distinction did not arise in isolation. The late Soviet and early post-Soviet years saw a revival of interest in esoteric literature (Menzel, Hagemester, and Glatzer Rosenthal 2012), including the works of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866–1949). Rudnev read widely, and although his system developed independently, he recognized in Gurdjieff a thinker who had grappled with similar questions. In conversations with students, he occasionally referred to Gurdjieff to illustrate a point, not to claim lineage but to show that the idea he was trying to express had precedents in other traditions.

Gurdjieff taught that the ordinary human being is not a unified self but a collection of “I’s,” each representing a different impulse, emotion, or habitual reaction. These “I’s” appear and disappear throughout the day, each claiming to be the real self. The person believes that he is one, yet he is many. Gurdjieff insisted that the first step toward inner development is to observe these “I’s” and recognize that they are not the true self. Only the observer, the one who sees the multiplicity, can begin the work of transformation (Needleman and Baker 1996).

Rudnev’s formulation was different, yet the underlying insight was similar. He taught that the person is not the thoughts that arise in the mind. Thoughts are patterns installed by society, family, and culture. They appear automatically. They claim authority. They generate suffering. Yet they are not the true self. The true self is the attention that can observe them.

The comparison with Gurdjieff helps clarify the originality of Rudnev’s approach. Gurdjieff’s system is complex, involving centers, shocks, and cosmological diagrams. Rudnev did not adopt this structure. He focused instead on the practical work of examining thoughts. He believed that the person must begin with what already occupies attention, including fear and pain.

These reactions are the “I’s” that dominate daily life. By examining them, we begin to see that they are not our true selves. This recognition is the beginning of self-control.

In Gurdjieff’s system, the multiplicity of “I’s” is a fundamental obstacle. In Rudnev’s system, incorrect thinking plays the same role. Both teachers insist that the person must learn to observe the mind. Both insist that the observer is distinct from the observed. Both insist that inner development begins with this recognition. Yet Rudnev’s method is simpler and more accessible. He does not ask the student to memorize diagrams or cosmological laws. He asks the student to examine a single thought and determine whether it produces suffering. If it does, he asks the student to change it. This practical approach makes his system easier to apply in daily life.

The comparison also illuminates the ethical dimension of Rudnev’s teaching. Gurdjieff believed that the person must struggle against mechanical reactions. Rudnev believed that the person must struggle against incorrect thinking. Both saw inner work as a form of liberation. Both saw the true self as something deeper than the patterns that dominate ordinary life. Both saw the path as a gradual process of self-observation and transformation.

Rudnev’s students often asked how his teaching related to other traditions. He answered that all genuine paths lead inward. He did not claim to be a successor to Gurdjieff, yet he acknowledged that Gurdjieff had expressed certain ideas clearly. He used Gurdjieff’s “not me” language to help students understand the distinction between the observer and the observed. He explained that when one says “this is not me,” one is not rejecting the world but recognizing that the true self is deeper than the patterns that appear in the mind.

This recognition became central to his system. It shaped the way he taught meditation, concentration, and self-observation, explained suffering, and understood spiritual development. It also shaped the way his students understood themselves. Many described the moment when they first realized that a thought could be changed as a turning point. They discovered that the thought was not the true self. They discovered that the observer was distinct from the thought. They discovered that inner development was possible.

Among the practices Rudnev introduced during these early years, he gave particular importance to Trataka, or “The Dot.” It was a simple exercise, yet he

regarded it as a foundational tool for developing attention. The practitioner fixed the gaze on a small black dot drawn on a sheet of paper and maintained this focus without interruption. As the minutes passed, thoughts, images, and internal dialogue gradually subsided, and the mind became clearer. For Rudnev, Trataka was not a mystical ritual but a discipline of concentration. He believed that even five or ten minutes of steady practice could strengthen the ability to observe the mind, reduce distraction, and prepare the student for deeper inner work. In his view, attention was the gateway to all spiritual development, and Trataka was one of the simplest ways to begin cultivating it.

Teaching Tantra

As Rudnev's system expanded in the mid-1990s, he also began addressing, among others, a subject that has historically generated misunderstanding: the role of sexual energy in spiritual development. This was not an eccentric innovation. It reflected ideas present in ancient Indian and Tibetan traditions, in the iconography of the Khajuraho temples, and in classical Tantric literature. Rudnev believed that sexual energy, when approached with discipline and awareness, could become a powerful instrument for inner transformation. He discussed these themes discreetly, in private conversations and in books such as *Darshan Tantra*, intended for mature students who were already engaged in sustained practice (Rudnev n.d.).

In these teachings, Rudnev emphasized that sexual energy is one of the strongest forces in human life. He argued that, when dissipated impulsively, it leaves the person depleted and distracted. He believed that ancient civilizations had understood this and had developed methods for directing sexual energy toward higher centers, particularly the heart and the mind. In his view, modern society had lost this knowledge. Cultural prohibitions had turned sexuality into a source of guilt, while commercialized eroticism had reduced it to a form of entertainment. Both tendencies, he argued, prevented people from understanding the deeper potential of sexual energy.

Rudnev taught that sexual energy is not inherently harmful. It becomes harmful only when it is used mechanically, without awareness. He believed that spiritual development requires learning to retain and elevate this energy rather than wasting it. He explained that certain breathing techniques, mental focus, and

physical discipline, including refraining from ejaculation during intercourse (Rudnev n.d., 121), can help a person remain centered during intimacy. He encouraged students to approach sexuality with mindfulness, emotional presence, and a sense of sacredness.

In *Darshan Tantra*, Rudnev described these teachings as part of a broader effort to integrate all aspects of human experience into the spiritual path. He believed that sexuality, when approached consciously, could strengthen vitality, deepen balance (Rudnev n.d., 107), and support the development of attention. He also believed that misunderstandings were inevitable. He knew that opponents would interpret any reference to sacred eroticism as evidence of impropriety, as it had happened with other maligned esoteric groups. For this reason, he presented these teachings discreetly and emphasized that they were optional, private, and secondary to the central work of transforming thought.

Despite these precautions, critics seized upon this aspect of his system. Anti-cult activists and hostile journalists began describing his school as a “sex cult” (Gumanova 2010), ignoring both the historical context of Tantric traditions and the private, individualized nature of the practices he taught. They conflated his emphasis on the spiritual potential of sexual energy with sensationalist allegations that bore no resemblance to the content of his books or the testimony of his students. This misrepresentation would later play a significant role in shaping Rudnev’s public image and in justifying the repression that followed.

In reality, the Tantric dimension of Rudnev’s teaching was one component of a much larger system centered on self-observation, transformation of thought, and the development of attention. It was not a recruitment tool, not a communal practice, and not a defining feature of his school. It was a specialized subject for students seeking to integrate their intimate lives into their spiritual path. The sensationalist interpretations that later circulated in the media reveal more about the anxieties of contemporary society than about the content of Rudnev’s teachings.

Organizational Expansion

This inner system matured during the same years in which his organizational activity expanded. In 1989, Rudnev’s school began as a small yoga group in

Novosibirsk with about six members. As the group grew rapidly, he founded two officially registered public associations in 1991 to organize his followers: the Siberian Association of Yogis and the Olyrna Association. These associations provided a legal framework for seminars, classes, and publications.

Three years later, a correspondence school was established, operating throughout the former USSR and covering topics such as yoga, shamanism, Orphism, and tantra. Subsequently, large-scale seminars were organized, attracting participants from across the former USSR. Numerous groups formed in various regions, where participants began to conduct classes independently based on Rudnev's teachings and books.

In 1993, Rudnev founded an ashram in Novosibirsk as a permanent residential community for his followers. It was not an institution with formal membership but a place where those most committed to the path could live near their teacher. In 1998, in-person seminars began to be held outside the former USSR. The first countries were Greece, Belgium, and the Netherlands, followed later by Mexico and Brazil.

In 1999, Rudnev dissolved the public associations when the police began monitoring him, but he continued to teach yoga. Around that time, the media began using the name "Ashram Shambhala" to refer to his movement. Rudnev did not coin this name, but his followers used it both to refer to the physical community of those living near their teacher and to denote an ideal ashram encompassing all who followed the same teachings. Eventually, Rudnev accepted this name while insisting that he had never founded "Ashram Shambhala" as an organization. It was more of a network of local groups united by his teachings, lectures, and books.

Over time, groups emerged in different countries and cities around the world. According to estimates from 2000, there were about 20,000 followers in Russia alone, and more than 100,000 worldwide. When Rudnev was arrested in 2010, some independent groups in Russia and abroad continued to draw on his teachings, while others used the name "Ashram Shambhala." Some of these groups faced their own legal challenges. However, they operated autonomously and without any guidance from Rudnev. During his imprisonment, all correspondence with him was subject to strict prison control: phone calls were allowed for fifteen minutes once a month, and letters were censored, making it impossible for him to issue instructions, coordinate activities, or exercise any form of leadership over the independent groups.

Would the Real Rudnev Please Stand Up?

By the time the Russian authorities began to take an interest in him, Rudnev had become a figure whose teaching touched thousands of people. This visibility, combined with his critical view of state structures and his refusal to conform to a normal life, made him a convenient target. The Orthodox Church saw in him a competitor. The anti-cult movement saw in him a case that could be used to justify its campaigns. The media saw in him a character that fit the template of the “evil cult leader.”

The spiritual biography reconstructed from family and student testimonies and his own words tells another story. It tells of a young man who, from adolescence onward, tried to understand why people suffer and how they can change. It tells of someone who escaped a brutal military system through a calculated act of self-preservation, not through madness. It tells of someone who used an inheritance to support spiritual and charitable projects. It tells of someone who believed that the first step toward self-knowledge is the transformation of thought.

The image of a con man who invented a movement to exploit followers is incompatible with the documented trajectory of his early life. The latter shows that the man who later appeared in court as a “cult leader” had spent years developing a method for inner work that many found meaningful. It shows that the narrative used in trials and media reports omits the spiritual dimension that was central to his self-understanding.

The period before his arrest in Russia is therefore crucial. It is the period in which his path took shape, his teaching matured, and his groups grew. It is also the period in which the seeds of later repression were planted. The tension with the Orthodox Church, the hostility of the anti-cult movement, and the sensationalism of television programs began to converge. They would later produce the public image that courts in Russia and prosecutors in Argentina adopted without examining the underlying biography.

To understand what happened later, one must start here. One must start with the boy in Novosibirsk who listened to his grandmother, the teenager who discovered yoga in a Soviet magazine, the conscript who refused to accept humiliation as his fate, the young man who began teaching, and the teacher who

explained to his students that the first obstacle on the path inward is incorrect thinking. Only then can one measure the distance between the spiritual biography and the stereotype imposed on him.

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The Rudnev Criminal Case in Russia

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ABSTRACT: The case of Konstantin Rudnev and his spiritual school, informally known as “Ashram Shambhala,” offers a paradigmatic illustration of how the Russian Federation’s evolving doctrine of “spiritual security” has been deployed to suppress nontraditional religious minorities. Drawing on court files, police reports, and media materials, the article reconstructs the trajectory of Rudnev’s yoga-based associations from their lawful establishment in the early 1990s to their denied re-registration and prohibition under the restrictive framework introduced by the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. The study demonstrates how the Russian Orthodox Church’s anti-cult structures, in cooperation with state security services, initiated an “operational development” that escalated into a media campaign, fabricated criminal charges, and an eleven-year prison sentence. The judicial proceedings reveal systemic violations of due process, reliance on uncorroborated testimony, and the instrumental use of discredited notions such as “brainwashing,” despite their rejection by international jurisprudence. The subsequent ban on “Ashram Shambhala”—imposed solely based on the criminal conviction and without independent evidentiary review—further illustrates the erosion of state neutrality in matters of religion and Russia’s departure from its obligations under international human rights law.

KEYWORDS: Konstantin Rudnev, Ashram Shambhala, Alexander Dvorkin, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Russian Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations.

Introduction

The story of the spiritual group commonly known as “Ashram Shambhala” and its leader, Konstantin Rudnev, in the Russian Federation is, unfortunately, representative of the fate that befalls minorities persecuted by the Russian authorities until they disappear entirely, in the name of the “spiritual security” of Russian citizens and the fight against extremism.

Rudnev served an eleven-year sentence in Russian prisons before finally going into exile in a country far from the persecution he had endured.

Unfortunately, this persecution followed him, and the same scenario was repeated at the instigation of the Argentine authorities as part of their campaign

against “cults,” with the authorities blindly and opportunistically relying on the fabricated accusations made by Putin’s regime.

The Russian Background: The Fight Against “Cults” to Protect “Spiritual Security”

In October 1990, a Law on Freedom of Religion was adopted under the regime of Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–2022), one of the last and most decisive liberalizing legislative reforms in the old Soviet system. For the first time in Russian history, practicing religion was declared “the unalienable right of Russian citizens.” This right also applied to all those residing in Russia, irrespective of their citizenship. The law maintained a strict separation between Church and State, ensured ideological neutrality of the State, and guaranteed equal rights for all faiths, regardless of their origins or size.

As an immediate consequence of the Law, Russia’s religious landscape began to change significantly. There was a resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church and other “traditional” religions—Muslim, Catholic, Jewish, and Buddhist. This also brought missionary activities from abroad, as well as proselytizing by religions new to Russia.

This evolution gave rise to a strong anti-cult movement focused on the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, which began promoting the idea that Russia’s “spiritual security” and traditional values were somehow at risk.

In this atmosphere, the government of Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007) passed a new religion law in September 1997 that was further amended in 2004, distinguishing between traditional and nontraditional religions in Russia.

The 1997 Federal Law No. 125-FZ on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, as well as the ideological stance and policy adopted by Russian authorities, thereafter, were inspired by the desire to ensure the “spiritual security” of Russia. This new concept expresses the purported role of the Russian Orthodox Church in safeguarding national values and security.

It imposed serious restrictions on the registration of religious organizations and on the activities of religious groups other than “traditional” religions.

Its preamble clearly indicated that

the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, recognizing the special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia, in the formation and development of its spirituality and culture, respecting Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other religions that are an integral part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia, adopts this Federal law.

All religious communities registered under the 1990 law were required to re-register. These traditional religions were granted systematic re-registration as “religious organizations.”

As for other religious organizations, many have been denied renewal of their registration and, as a result, have challenged this decision in national courts and before the European Court of Human Rights. The Salvation Army, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Church of Scientology, among others, have filed such lawsuits and have prevailed before the European Court.

Those denied re-registration as “religious organizations” could continue to operate as informal “religious groups.” As a result, they were deprived of several rights as a result of the loss of their legal personality.

This was precisely the case for the two spiritual yoga associations that Konstantin Rudnev founded and led. After the 1997 law took effect, both the “Siberian Association of Yogis” and the “Olyrna” association—incorporated in 1992 and 1994 as religious associations because their teachings addressed the path to God and spiritual development, and their practices included religious chants, prayers, and various forms of meditation and spiritual exercises—were denied re-registration. Like many other religious groups at the time, they effectively ceased to exist in their previous legal form.

Nevertheless, these groups continued their activities informally and without official registration. The media and the anti-cult movement within the Russian Orthodox Church dubbed these informal activities “Ashram Shambhala” (the name some students had given to Rudnev’s center in Siberia). This name was used to refer to all of Konstantin Rudnev’s activities, his yoga groups, and the people who lived with him.

Specific provisions of the 1997 Law addressed informal groups. Because the provisions regarding dissolution could not be applied to them, Section 14.2 of the law set forth grounds for prohibiting their activities, citing various grievances, such as threats to public safety and order, acts aimed at carrying out extremist activities,

the destruction of families, violations of personal rights, or incitement of citizens to refuse to fulfill their civic duties.

It was precisely under this Article that the activities of the religious group “Ashram Shambhala” were banned in the Russian Federation by a court on April 11, 2014, at the request of the prosecutor, who claimed that the group represented “a pseudo-Tantric neo-pagan totalitarian sect with a destructive cult, whose activities are associated with violence and incitement of citizens to refuse to fulfill civil duties.”

The Start of Legal Proceedings in Russia

Shortly after the creation of Rudnev’s yoga associations in the 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) launched a campaign of persecution against them. At that time, the clergy established a nationwide “anti-cult” department, and a center began operating locally in Novosibirsk, where these associations were active.

The “Information and Consultation Center on Sectarianism in the Name of the Holy Right-Believer Prince Alexander Nevsky” was established in Novosibirsk in 1993–1994 and has been led by Archpriest Alexander Novopashin since then.

It was an Orthodox Church community center that collaborated with government institutions—particularly the judiciary—in the fight against the so-called “cults” or “extremist” groups by disseminating accusatory information, collaborating with journalists, and appearing as “expert” witnesses in Russian courts.

Archpriest Novopashin engaged in collecting information about all religious groups and “cults.” Data collection was carried out through church channels—via parishioners—and possibly in cooperation with the police or the FSB. This included information about Konstantin Rudnev’s group, based in Novosibirsk.

After the information was collected, it was passed on to journalists.

First Signs of Persecution

The first time Konstantin Rudnev's group learned that the FSB was interested in it was in 1998, when FSB officers came to the home of one of the female students. They suddenly appeared and began questioning her. She refused to cooperate or provide any information. It was then that it became clear that Konstantin Rudnev and his group had become the target of an "operational development" (in which the police or special services secretly investigate and gather material against a specific person to prepare a future criminal case).

Most likely, the "operational development" began even earlier—possibly in the mid-1990s, when the group started holding large seminars and meetings in large halls. The FSB traditionally supervised any organizations that could influence people. Even amateur song clubs came under FSB scrutiny: under the guise of monitoring singers, they checked whether anyone was engaged in unlawful activities. Thus, the security services monitored all organizations, regardless of their profile.

In 1999, the first open persecutions began: newspaper articles and television programs appeared. At first, these were Novosibirsk news, and later the materials reached the central channels. Novopashin provided journalists with information for their articles. Among these details were facts that only FSB officers could have known.

Subsequently, this wave reached Moscow, and Alexander Dvorkin took it up at the national level. Through journalists, Dvorkin also actively contributed to inflating the scandal.

A large-scale campaign against "cults" began on television, targeting groups such as Konstantin Rudnev's. Dvorkin openly classified "Ashram Shambhala" as a totalitarian occult-tantric cult and included it in his materials, lectures, and publications. His public attacks intensified in the 2000s.

Judiciary Developments in 2008–2010

All this led to active operational development in 2008. The order came either from Novosibirsk or from Moscow. The matter then reached the Center "E," which launched a full-scale investigation and began interrogations.

Center “E” in Novosibirsk was the Center for Countering Extremism of the Main Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for the Novosibirsk Region. It was a specialized police unit responsible for identifying, preventing, and suppressing extremist activities. It was part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ structure and could conduct inspections and operational measures, participate in investigations, and transfer materials to investigative authorities.

Law enforcement began building a criminal case and sought witnesses. Having found nothing, they charged Rudnev with rape and planted drugs in his belongings. The first serious attack took place in 2008. By 2010, the case had largely been fabricated, and Konstantin Rudnev was taken into custody.

Specific Incidents

In 2008, a raid took place. Konstantin Rudnev was taken to the police station, questioned, and then released that same evening. The same was true for everyone else who was present with him. He then returned home; on the surface, everything seemed calm, but the media campaign continued. Following this incident, a report was broadcast on NTV, accompanied by a video, and received widespread coverage on national television networks.

As early as 1999, a call for witnesses had been issued against the group, but it had come to nothing. Some parents, searching for their (adult) children, had denounced the group. In 2004, a similar situation occurred: parents were again searching for their children, who had cut off all contact with them. The police went to Rudnev’s ashram to investigate, but no one was found there, and the case was closed without further action.

Two similar raids also failed. The police merely checked who lived at that address. These raids sparked renewed interest among journalists and the media in discrediting the group and gathering additional evidence. Each incident drew fresh attention to the group.

Reasons for the State's Interest

The state already maintained close ties with the Church, and Putin was actively cooperating with the Russian Orthodox Church. At that time, Konstantin Rudnev's public statements were already widely known: he spoke out against Putin and criticized Church leaders. Rudnev emphasized that instead of devoting itself to the spiritual development of the faithful, the Orthodox Church was engaged in selling candles, manipulating people, and doing no developmental work, either in churches or in monasteries. According to him, a formalistic cult prevailed there, in which everything was repeated mechanically, and services were conducted in Old Church Slavonic, a language most people did not understand.

While gathering evidence in collaboration with the FSB, Novopashin prepared and submitted a dossier to Putin. The dossier primarily emphasized that Rudnev had spoken out against the government and, personally, against Putin; that he had criticized Putin; that he had claimed Putin would lead the country into a serious crisis; and that he had cast doubt on Putin's ability to lead. This provoked strong displeasure in Putin. He then gave the go-ahead for the full development and criminal prosecution of Konstantin Rudnev. In 2008, Center E received the "green light" to take all necessary actions. Consequently, in 2010, Konstantin Rudnev was taken into custody.

The Trial and Criminal Conviction

The trial lasted a year and a half. Rudnev spent nine months in pretrial detention before the court proceedings began. The trial itself then lasted another year and a half.

What emerged from the trial was that no one listened to Rudnev's lawyers. His defense attorneys dismantled all the prosecutors' arguments, but no one paid any attention. Their arguments were completely ignored and set aside in subsequent court decisions.

As a result, the following verdict was handed down:

- Violation of Article 239.1 of the Russian Criminal Code for creating a religious association infringing upon the liberties and rights of individuals.

This accusation was based on the testimony of parents whose adult children had left the family home and severed all contact with them.

The people who actually left their families were never questioned—that is, the alleged victims. Those who were questioned said they left their families on their own initiative, not because of Rudnev. Some had arguments with their families; others wanted to live independently.

Despite all the evidence, Rudnev was held responsible for all of this, even though the complaints came from parents who barely knew him—or didn't even know who he was. The police turned these parents against Rudnev, telling them their children had left because of him. Without knowing or understanding anything, the parents began writing statements in the hope that, if Rudnev were found guilty, their children would return.

Rudnev was found guilty “of establishing a religious organization whose activities involve violence against citizens and incitement of citizens to refuse to fulfill their civic duties, as well as of leading such an organization.” He was sentenced to restricted liberty for 2 (two) years but was released from serving the sentence imposed due to the expiration of the statute of limitations.

- Violation of Article 228.1 of the Criminal Code relating to the illegal sale or dispatch of narcotic drugs.

This charge involved 5 grams of heroin that an investigator claimed to have found when Konstantin was arrested at his home. The investigator had seized Konstantin's clothes and “found” the bag in his pocket.

The bag was not sealed after it was seized, which means anyone could have slipped anything into it, and it may have been planted there. Due to this gross procedural flaw, the case should have been dismissed immediately.

Under Russian law, possession and distribution of drugs are separate crimes with significantly different punishments. Possession is covered by Article 228 of the Russian Criminal Code and is applied by courts when drugs are considered for personal use rather than for sale.

Initially, the charge was drug possession for personal use. However, the Russian judiciary could not prove personal use because no drugs were found in Konstantin's hair, blood, or under his nails.

The charge was later reclassified as “preparation for distribution.” This led to a harsher sentence under Article 228.1 of the Criminal Code: eight and a half years’ imprisonment.

In his appeal against the conviction, his attorney explained:

During the court hearing, Rudnev’s guilt in the preparation and sale of narcotic substances was not proven. There is no evidence in the criminal case regarding the source of purchase of the narcotic substances; no scales or devices for dividing the narcotic substance into small doses were found during the search; all individuals present in the cottage on September 30, 2010, including Rudnev, were sober according to the medical examination reports. No signs of drug use or other intoxication were found. A drug-sniffing dog found nothing in the house during the search.

However, Rudnev was sentenced to 8 and a half years in prison for preparing to illegally distribute narcotics, based on Article 228.1, which prohibits the sale and dispatch of narcotic drugs, in conjunction with Article 30 on the preparation for a crime and attempted crimes.

- Violation of Articles 131 on rape and 132 on violent actions of a sexual character.

The same was true of the rape charge: there was no evidence, apart from one unsubstantiated oral account of events that had allegedly occurred two years earlier. The rape was not proven in any way, yet Rudnev was sentenced to three and a half years in prison.

In his appeal pleadings, his lawyer argued that:

The defense has repeatedly presented evidence that the charges are fabricated under Articles 131–132 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. However, the court disregarded all arguments presented by the defense and the defendant. K.D. Rudnev did not admit guilt of rape or acts of a sexual nature, explaining that he does not remember A.M.V. [the alleged victim] and did not have a sexual relationship with her. K.D. Rudnev’s testimony that he did not engage in sexual relations with V. is corroborated by the testimony of several witnesses questioned during the court hearing. Furthermore, no evidence was presented during the court hearing to support the victim V.’s testimony regarding her residence at the cottage where Rudnev resided. There is no evidence whatsoever that, during the period from June 2007, as well as from December 25, 2007, through April 2008, V. did not merely attend gatherings at the cottages but actually resided there and engaged in an intimate relationship with Rudnev.

However, in the absence of any evidence—or rather, contrary to all existing evidence—the Novosibirsk District Court handed down its guilty verdict on 7

February 2013, following exclusively the line prepared by the Russian intelligence services for the prosecution.

For violations of Articles 131 and 132, Rudnev was sentenced to imprisonment for a term of 3 (three) years and 6 (six) months for each offense, for rape and acts of a sexual nature.

Then, pursuant to Article 69.3 of the Criminal Code, he was sentenced to a final prison term of 11 (eleven) years, to be served in a strict-regime penal colony, after a partial aggregation of the sentences imposed (eight and a half years and two terms of three and a half years each) for all of the offenses. The term of imprisonment, including detention and pretrial detention, was calculated starting September 30, 2010.

Later, at the appellate level, the Criminal Division of the Novosibirsk Regional Court likewise refused to hear the defense. The appellate judges supported only the prosecution's position and upheld the conviction on 27 May 2013.

Then, on August 28, 2013, a judge of the Novosibirsk Regional Court, after reviewing the court decisions and examining the arguments in the Cassation appeal filed by Konstantin Rudnev's attorney, found no grounds to refer the appeal for consideration at a hearing before the Court of Cassation.

Rudnev's lawyer then filed a complaint with the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation challenging that refusal. However, on May 29, 2014, the Supreme Court also refused to consider the appeal against the verdict.

As a last resort, he filed a supervisory complaint with the Supreme Court. It was finally rejected by a ruling dated April 16, 2015.

This case perfectly illustrates how the judicial system works in the Russian Federation. It is a David versus Goliath battle: the defendant's attorney pitted against the police, prosecutors, and judges, who stand united. Once charges are filed, it is very difficult, if not nearly impossible, to have the case dismissed or to secure an acquittal. In practice, and under State pressure, judges often rely on evidence from prosecutors, investigators, police, and false witnesses.

This is what happened to Konstantin Rudnev in the Russian Federation, leading him to spend eleven years in Russian prisons, from which he was released on 26 September 2021. He then decided to move abroad.

After his conviction, Rudnev was transferred to a correctional colony in Norilsk, where conditions were extremely harsh. This region is known for long periods of polar night, and winter temperatures can drop to -60°C . The prison regime was very strict, with severe restrictions on inmate communication.

Then, in 2014, he was placed in solitary confinement to prevent him from exerting any influence over other inmates. As a result, he spent the next seven years in solitary confinement. The authorities feared that he could influence other prisoners even through ordinary communication.

But the Russian authorities did not stop at breaking him personally; they also took steps to eradicate the religious movement he had founded.

The Ban and International Case Law

Once Rudnev's criminal conviction became final, the Novosibirsk District Court ordered, on December 18, 2013, the destruction of the religious group's books, which had been seized as evidence of the crime of "establishing a religious association that infringed upon the freedoms and rights of individuals," under Article 239.1 of the Russian Criminal Code.

Based on the same Article and conviction, the Prosecutor went a step further, requesting that the activities of the informal group "Ashram Shambhala" be banned. However, although he had been convicted under Article 239.1, Rudnev was exempted from serving his sentence on that ground because the statute of limitations had expired.

Rudnev's attorney argued in his appeals that the conviction should be overturned for precisely this reason. Still, none of the higher courts ruled in his favor, even though he was raising an indisputable point of law.

The reason for this "reinterpretation" of the law must surely lie in the subsequent decisions regarding the destruction of books and the ban on the religious group's activities.

The government wanted to prosecute and eliminate "Ashram Shambhala," even if it meant disregarding applicable law and prosecuting for crimes whose statute of limitations had expired.

On April 11, 2014, the Novosibirsk Regional Court, sitting as a single-judge panel, heard the civil case in open court regarding the prosecutor's motion for a ban. The Prosecutor of the Novosibirsk Region had applied to the court, allegedly to "protect the rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests of an indefinite circle of persons."

In support of his motion, he cited the arguments the prosecutor advanced in the criminal proceedings. He relied on Article 61 of the Code of Civil Procedure to ask the Court to adopt the criminal court's findings in full and issue the banning order.

Article 61.4 sets forth the grounds for exemption from the burden of proof as follows:

The court sentence in a criminal case that has entered into legal force is binding on the court when considering the civil-law consequences of the actions of the person with respect to whom the court sentence is passed, including questions of whether these actions have actually taken place and whether the person in question has committed them.

Consequently, the Court did not have to present any evidence and relied on the conviction, which was itself unsubstantiated.

Before the judge of the Regional Court, the prosecutor reproduced, word for word, the entire argument presented by the prosecution during the criminal proceedings to prove a violation of Article 239.1 of the Penal Code, and the court relied on it when imposing the ban.

He first indicated that the religious group "Ashram Shambhala," created by Konstantin Rudnev, represented "a pseudo-Tantric neo-pagan totalitarian destructive cult, whose activities are associated with violence and incitement of citizens to refuse to fulfill civil duties."

The Prosecutor further claimed that based on his

religious teaching, containing extracts from Buddhism, Hinduism, shamanism, mystical Eastern teachings, as well as the Indian teaching of yoga, K.D. Rudnev laid out the denial of generally accepted values of morality and ethics.

Following this unacceptable assessment of religious beliefs by a government official and the violation of the state's duty of neutrality in religious matters, as provided for in international treaties binding on the Russian Federation, the prosecutor put forward a far-fetched and highly questionable theory to explain Rudnev's allegedly harmful influence on his followers.

He explained that

To create a religious group, involve an indefinite circle of people in it, and promote the religious teaching of the religious group “Ashram Shambhala,” K.D. Rudnev and participants of the religious group conducted paid classes and seminars under the cover of teaching yoga

through which they recruited followers to place them under Konstantin Rudnev’s control, making them dependent and unable to leave the group, using “methods specifically developed to exert aggressive external influence on the psyche.”

The “methods specifically developed to exert aggressive external influence on the psyche” refer to no less than the discredited and unscientific notion of “brainwashing” or “mind control,” which has been rejected by courts internationally (Introvigne 2022).

In 1981, the Italian Constitutional Court ruled that the concept of “plagio” (the Italian term) was too vague to allow a clear definition of the corresponding offense; it therefore ordered its removal from the Italian Penal Code (Corte Costituzionale 1981).

The Constitutional Court found that, given the current state of scientific knowledge, it was impossible to determine whether, and at what point, persuasion through communication could turn into a form of psychological suggestion and result in the deprivation of the free will of the individuals concerned.

The Court further found:

As for the evaluation of the results, it will be purely symptomatic and will be deemed positive or negative depending on whether the activity conducted on the passive subject leads the subject to adopt behaviors that deviate from ethically, socially, and legally acceptable norms.

The question of whether the target person is psychologically subjugated must then be decided arbitrarily by the judges and depends on the degree of social acceptability of the relationship and the influence at issue.

Consequently, the Italian Court concluded that there was “an absolute arbitrariness in its practical application” and ruled that article 603 of the Penal Code was unconstitutional.

This “absolute arbitrariness” is precisely what was applied to Rudnev, accused of denying “generally accepted values of morality and ethics.”

The European Court of Human Rights has reached the same conclusion and has already ruled against the Russian Federation on this basis.

In the case *Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow v. Russia*, the European Court held in 2010 that “there is no generally accepted and scientific definition of what constitutes ‘mind control’” (European Court of Human Rights 2010, 129). It rejected the Russian authorities’ argument that their proselytizing “infringed the rights and freedoms of its members or third parties.”

The Court accordingly ruled that the dissolution of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ association constituted a violation by Russia of their right to freedom of religion under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

This is without mentioning the entire body of case law in the United States, in a legal battle that ended in the 1990s with U.S. courts rejecting the theory of mind control as applied to religious matters, because it was neither scientific nor reliable (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990).

It follows that this vague and arbitrary concept, which has been discredited worldwide, should not be used to send dissidents to penal colonies or to decide whether to ban an entire religious group within the territory of the Russian Federation.

The Human Rights Committee has provided detailed guidance on the application of Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects the right to freedom of religion or belief:

Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community (“General Comment no. 22”: United Nations Human Rights Committee 1993).

Under the Covenant to which the Russian Federation is a party, States have a duty of neutrality in religious matters and cannot assess religious practices in light of “generally accepted values of morality and ethics.”

Nor can they eliminate religious minorities, as these groups face hostility from the Russian Orthodox Church, which seeks to maintain its monopoly over the souls of Russian citizens.

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Konstantin Rudnev in Montenegro (2022–2024): Two Unrelated Events and a Manufactured Scandal

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ABSTRACT: This article reconstructs Konstantin Rudnev’s stay in Montenegro from 2022 to 2024, showing how two unrelated events—the routine document check at an anti-Putin conference in Bar and an October 2024 police operation in Žabljak—were later merged into a fabricated scandal by regional media. After fleeing Russia and applying for asylum, Rudnev was placed under surveillance based on decades of defamatory Russian materials, without any independent assessment by Montenegrin authorities. Although the Bar incident produced no charges and the Žabljak case involved tourists unconnected to Rudnev, pro-Russian outlets such as *Pobjeda* recycled Kremlin narratives and inserted his name into the story, prompting wider repetition in Montenegro, Serbia, and Russia, and later in Argentina. Official documents confirm that no criminal proceedings were ever initiated against him. The case illustrates how transnational repression, media vulnerability, and reliance on foreign propaganda can distort asylum processes and public perception. It also highlights the broader risks faced by Russian dissidents in small states exposed to external influence.

KEYWORDS: Konstantin Rudnev, Ashram Shambhala, Konstantin Rudnev in Montenegro, Russian Influence on Montenegro, *Pobjeda*.

Seeking Peace in Montenegro

When Konstantin Rudnev arrived in Montenegro in February 2022, he did so as a man seeking protection rather than visibility. He had spent eleven years in Russian prisons, eight of them in solitary confinement. Russian authorities had repeatedly targeted him since the 1990s for his religious activities and his criticism of the government. After the war in Ukraine began, remaining in Russia was not an option. Montenegro, which had become a refuge for many Russians opposed to the war, including some of Rudnev’s wife’s friends, offered a legal path to international protection.

Rudnev applied for asylum, obtained residence permits, and settled quietly in the coastal city of Bar. His life there was uneventful. Yet, within two years, Montenegrin and regional media would publish articles linking him to an incident

in Žabljak with which he had no connection. The story of how this happened illustrates how rumors, recycled propaganda, and transnational repression can create a false narrative where none exists.

Why This Story Matters Beyond Montenegro

The case of Konstantin Rudnev in Montenegro is not an ephemeral local administrative episode or a simple media misunderstanding. It is part of a wider pattern increasingly observed across Europe, including the shift toward biased narratives, the vulnerability of small countries to external propaganda, and the ease with which misinformation can shape public perception and opinion. As dissidents fled Russia after the beginning of the ongoing war, host countries faced the challenge of distinguishing between legitimate asylum claims and politically motivated accusations. Rudnev's own experience illustrates how delicate and frail this process can be when foreign propaganda is allowed to enter and influence domestic institutions.

Montenegro, once an illustrious Principality steadfast in its pride and autonomy, now navigating its path between deeper Western integration and longstanding cultural ties with Russia, has become a microcosm of the tensions. This case therefore offers insight not only into Rudnev's struggle for protection but also into the broader dynamics of transnational restraint, media manipulation, and the "weaponization" of reputation.

Arrival in Montenegro and the Asylum Application (2022–2023)

Rudnev entered Montenegro on February 12, 2022, through Podgorica Airport. On April 12, 2022, he submitted an application for international protection. The application detailed the reasons for his fear of returning to Russia: religious persecution, political repression, repeated arrests, the 2010 fabricated conviction that led to eleven years in prison, continuing threats after his release, and the general danger posed by the war and the Russian prison system.

The Montenegrin authorities rejected the application under Article 3 of the Law on International and Temporary Protection of Foreigners. On January 24, 2023,

his lawyer filed an appeal with the Administrative Court. On November 11, 2024, the court rejected the appeal, concluding that the risk of persecution had not been sufficiently demonstrated.

The decision did not allege any wrongdoing by Rudnev in Montenegro. It simply reflected the restrictive approach Montenegro had begun to adopt toward Russian asylum seekers.

Surveillance Triggered by the Asylum Application

Once Rudnev applied for asylum, his name became available to Montenegrin law enforcement and intelligence services. The authorities relied almost entirely on Russian materials to assess him. These materials consisted of more than twenty years of Russian propaganda portraying Rudnev as the leader of a “totalitarian cult,” a “criminal,” and a “dangerous manipulator.” No Montenegrin agency conducted an independent investigation. No expert examined his teachings. No academic or legal analysis was performed. The authorities adopted the Russian narrative.

As a result, Rudnev came under surveillance. He did not hide. He lived openly, spent time in nature, and tried to recover his health after years of imprisonment. Yet police officers repeatedly checked his documents, searched his car, and inspected the people accompanying him. These checks produced nothing. No weapons were found. No prohibited items were discovered. The searches revealed only tourist equipment and clothing.

The Anti-Putin Conference in Bar (April 2024)

In April 2024, Montenegro hosted an anti-Putin conference attended by Russian dissidents, activists, and exiles of different political persuasions. Montenegro had become a gathering point for Russians who opposed the war and the Kremlin.

Some media covered the conference and described how Russian opposition figures were gathering to discuss the war, repression, and the future of Russia. They also noted that Montenegro had become a hub for political refugees. The conference brought together individuals who had publicly opposed

the Kremlin. Given the relationships between Montenegro and Russia, it was unsurprising that Montenegrin security services took an interest in the participants.

Rudnev was invited to attend the congress. He and his wife stayed in a hotel in Bar. During the event, police and migration officers conducted a routine document check of all hotel guests. Their passports and residence permits were verified. No violations were found. Several people, including Rudnev, were questioned. Some documents, electronic equipment, and a home first aid kit were temporarily seized. Since no offenses were identified, everyone was released immediately.

It was a standard procedure for all conference participants. It did not involve any suspicion of wrongdoing. It did not lead to any administrative or criminal proceedings. It ended the same day.

Reportedly, an American woman staying at the hotel was found in possession of a large quantity of pharmaceutical products, and an investigation was opened for possible unauthorized trade (article 284 of the Criminal Code of Montenegro). It appears that no charges were filed. However, other hotel guests were interrogated about possible connections to the woman.

When Rudnev was arrested in Argentina, a request was sent to Montenegro regarding possible illegal activities he had been involved in there. On April 16, 2025, Interpol's National Central Bureau for Montenegro in Podgorica responded by email that

A local warrant was issued for the person Rudnev KONSTANTIN by the Local police unit in Bar—the economic crime suppression unit, to collect additional information (to take a statement) from him as a citizen for the criminal offense of illicit trade from [sic] Article 284 of the Criminal Code of Montenegro (NCB Podgorica 2025).

Rudnev and his wife claim they never received a summons to testify in the Article 284 case, possibly because they had changed their residence or because the summons was issued after they had left Montenegro. Prosecutors in Argentina used the April 16, 2025, email as evidence that Rudnev had committed crimes in Montenegro. In fact, the local police hoped to “collect additional information” by “taking a statement” from him.

Unpleasant as it was, the incident at the Bar hotel did not result in any administrative or criminal proceedings against Rudnev. However, media campaigns largely based on Russian sources and claiming that he was reorganizing

his “cult” in Bar influenced Rudnev’s decision to move to a more secluded area in Northern Montenegro. There, police surveillance continued, but no evidence of wrongdoing was found, and no charges were filed.

Montenegro’s Political Climate and Russian Influence

To understand why the April document check later became the seed of a media scandal, one must consider Montenegro’s political climate. Although Montenegro is formally aligned with Western institutions, Russian influence remains strong in parts of society and media. Russian citizens have long invested in Montenegro’s tourism and real estate sectors. Russian media narratives circulate widely. Russian intelligence networks have historically operated in the region (WestBalkanNet 2024; Potocar 2026). In this environment, Russian propaganda about dissidents can easily be reproduced by local outlets without verification. Some vocal opponents of Putin have been arrested under various pretexts.

The anti-Putin congress may have triggered heightened surveillance. Rudnev’s name, already associated with Russian propaganda, appeared in the context of opposition activity. This combination made him a target for increased scrutiny. The April document check was routine, yet it placed him on the radar of journalists who later sought to connect him to unrelated events.

A Completely Separate Incident: Žabljak (October 2024)

Six months later, in October 2024, a completely different incident occurred in a completely different part of Montenegro. In the mountain town of Žabljak, police detained several Russian tourists staying in a rented house. The police raided the house, and several women were detained.

The coverage of the arrests by the pro-Russian daily *Pobjeda* set the tone. Several other media in Montenegro, Serbia, and Russia repeated the information. On October 7 (Zečević 2024) and again on October 8 (Robović and Zečević 2024), *Pobjeda* reported that the police had confiscated the passports of several Russian women and that the rented facility was suspected of being used for online filming of adult films. The article claimed that local citizens “heard unusual sounds coming from the rented building, which raised suspicions that something strange

was happening.” “The raid revealed that the rented facility was suspected of being used for online filming of adult films,” *Pobjeda* said.

The article went on to claim that the detained Russian citizens were “suspected of being members of the infamous Russian cult Ashram Shambhala” and that the adult film project “was organized and financed by Konstantin Rudnev, the founder of the cult.”

But in fact, *Pobjeda*’s role went beyond journalism. The October 8 article boasted that it was the pro-Russian media outlet that obtained Russian documents about Rudnev and that it had asked the Montenegrin police to intervene. *Pobjeda* claimed that Rudnev was organizing in Montenegro “orgies under the guise of alleged yoga courses and sexual liberation seminars.” “More than five months ago, *Pobjeda* asked the Police Directorate whether, based on reports from citizens of Žabljak and Bar, it had searched two hotels in which it found several Russian citizens,” which the newspaper insisted were members of the “cult.” “The police did not answer us,” the newspaper reported, “whether it had been determined who financed their stay, whether they were legally staying in our country, with what motive, and whether it had been determined that it was an organization and which one.”

It thus seems that Russian sources fed information to *Pobjeda*, which in turn put pressure on the police to investigate the connections between the Russians renting a building in Žabljak and Rudnev. But these connections were not found.

The Žabljak case concerned a group of Russian tourists whose identities were not disclosed. The police operation was limited to the individuals found in the house. The investigation focused on whether the women had violated Montenegrin laws on pornography. The women were questioned and released. No charges were filed. No criminal case was opened.

Rudnev did not appear as a suspect. He did not appear as the accused. His name was mentioned only in a section containing “additional information,” without any procedural relevance. If there had been real evidence of his involvement, a criminal case would have been opened. No such case exists. There is no criminal prosecution in Montenegro. There is no international wanted notice. There is no Interpol request.

Two years have passed since the first publications appeared. If the accusations had any basis, the investigation would have continued, charges would have been filed, and official documents would have emerged. None of this has occurred.

But despite the lack of evidence, several regional outlets—in Montenegro, Serbia and Russia—continued publishing articles attempting to link the Žabljak incident to Rudnev. These publications did not cite official documents. They did not explain how the connection was established. Some asserted that “Rudnev and his wife” had been detained in Montenegro, a false claim.

What happened was that some journalists, either receiving instructions from Russia or seeking a more prominent headline, had inserted Rudnev’s name into the story. They did so without verifying whether he had been present in Žabljak, had been detained, or was connected to the individuals involved. The result was a false narrative that conflated two unrelated events: the document check in Bar in April 2024 and the police operation in Žabljak in October 2024.

The timeline alone disproves the connection. Six months separated the two incidents. They occurred in different cities. Rudnev and his wife were officially registered in Bar throughout 2024. They did not travel to Žabljak. They did not know the individuals detained there. They did not participate in any events held in the house. They did not appear in any of the photographs published by the media. No man in these pictures could be mistaken for Rudnev.

Pornography allegations were based on stereotypes. In Russia, during earlier raids on buildings associated with Rudnev, investigators applied a simplistic template: if many women were present, the situation must involve prostitution or pornography. This template was used repeatedly in Russian media campaigns against him. It appears that some journalists in Montenegro or Serbia transferred these old allegations into the new context, assuming that any group of Russian women must be connected to Rudnev and that any cameras must indicate pornography.

Although not related to Rudnev, it appears that the Russians investigated in Žabljak had not committed any crime either. The official case materials in Montenegro confirm that no pornographic materials were found. The presence of cameras does not constitute proof of criminal activity. No images of erotic content were published. No charges were filed. The investigation ended without any

criminal proceedings. If the police had found actual evidence of pornography, a criminal case would have been opened. This did not happen.

However, the intensification of the media campaign against Rudnev after the Žabljak incident ultimately persuaded him that he could not live peacefully in Montenegro. He then left the country and moved to Argentina.

Montenegro Media Parroting Russian Propaganda

Montenegrin media relied heavily on Russian sources when reporting on Rudnev. The *Pobjeda* articles cited above repeated claims that had appeared years earlier in Russian tabloids. They described “a Russian cult filming adult movies” and “enslaving and raping women.” These claims were not supported by evidence. They were based on recycled narratives from Russian propaganda campaigns targeting Rudnev since the 1990s.

This phenomenon is not unique. Scholars of transnational repression have documented how authoritarian states export defamatory narratives about dissidents to foreign media. Montenegro, which has historically been under strong Russian influence, is particularly vulnerable to such narratives. The Žabljak case shows how easily Russian propaganda can be reproduced in local media without verification.

Possibly, the anti-Putin congress in Bar triggered the entire chain of events. When Rudnev attended the congress, his name appeared in the context of Russian opposition activity. This likely increased the interest of Montenegrin security services, which were already relying on Russian materials to assess him. The surveillance that followed, the repeated document checks, and the eagerness of some journalists to link him to the Žabljak case all fit the pattern of transnational repression: the use of foreign institutions to extend the reach of an authoritarian state’s campaigns against dissidents.

Montenegro’s rejection of his asylum application also fits this pattern. The decision relied heavily on Russian narratives and ignored the documented history of persecution. It reflected a broader trend in which states under Russian influence adopt Moscow’s view of dissidents rather than conducting independent assessments.

The Broader Implications of the Case

The Rudnev case highlights several structural issues:

- The fragility of asylum systems when evidence includes or consists only or mostly of foreign propaganda materials.
- The vulnerability of small countries to external influence, especially when media ecosystems lack vigorous fact-checking mechanisms.
- The ease with which reputational harm can be exported, creating long-lasting consequences for individuals who have already suffered prejudice and persecution in their own countries.
- The responsibility of host countries to conduct independent assessments rather than relying on politically motivated materials provided by countries of origin.
- The need for additional ethical and legal training for journalists, especially in regions where external influence is more present.

These considerations stem from the fact that the Rudnev case is not an isolated anomaly within the asylum context, but rather part of a larger pattern affecting many dissidents across Europe.

Conclusion: A Manufactured Scandal

The period in Montenegro of Rudnev's life was not marked by criminal activity. It was marked by legal residence, administrative compliance, and an attempt to rebuild life after leaving Russia. The false narrative that emerged in the media reflects not his actions but the persistence of earlier campaigns against him. It shows how easily a name can be inserted into a story to make it more dramatic. It shows how difficult it is to correct misinformation once it has been published.

Understanding the Montenegro period requires separating fact from rumor. It requires recognizing that the media merged two unrelated incidents. It requires acknowledging that the connection was invented. It requires examining official documents rather than relying on speculation. It requires seeing the pattern in which Rudnev's name is used to sensationalize stories involving Russians abroad.

The facts tell a different story: one of misrepresentation and of the media connecting events without evidence. They also tell a story of how the truth can be restored through careful examination.

Only by doing so can one understand what truly happened in Montenegro.

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From a Hospital Referral to a “Transnational Cult” Case: Media Circulation and Evidentiary Construction in Argentina

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how a hospital referral in Bariloche in March 2025 was quickly transformed into a far-reaching criminal investigation alleging the existence of a “coercive transnational organization” led by Konstantin Rudnev. Drawing on judicial records, forensic reports, party submissions, media coverage, and interviews, the study reconstructs the evidentiary expansion by which observations made under difficult linguistic and intercultural conditions were reinterpreted as signs of trafficking, servitude, identity alteration, and narcotics transportation. The analysis shows that Argentine investigators relied heavily on a pre-existing foreign archive—Russian and Montenegrin media, anti-cult narratives, and the public mythology surrounding Rudnev—to supply the attributes of an “organization” not documented locally. Early national reporting amplified these assumptions, creating a confirmation loop in which repetition substituted for independent corroboration. The article highlights the procedural consequences of mistranslation, disputed attribution, and contradictory forensic findings, including negative narcotics reports that failed to dislodge the allegation from judicial reasoning. Through a legal-anthropological lens, the study demonstrates how institutional classifications can become durable before their evidentiary foundations are stabilized, shaping both the investigation’s trajectory and the defendants’ procedural positions.

KEYWORDS: Konstantin Rudnev, Anti-Cult Movement in Argentina, Human Trafficking and Religious Movements, Media and Religious Movements, Russians in Argentina.

Introduction

The Argentine proceedings against Konstantin Rudnev began in March 2025 with a hospital referral concerning Elena Makarova, identified as R.T. in the judicial file (although multiple media have now disclosed her name), a pregnant Russian citizen, in San Carlos de Bariloche. The referral did not concern a religious organization, a local spiritual school, or a complaint against Rudnev. Within days, however, the episode had been reorganized publicly and procedurally as the “discovery” of a transnational “cult” involved in human trafficking, sexual

exploitation, servitude, attempted alteration of a newborn’s identity, immigration offenses, and drug transportation. This report examines that expansion.

The proceedings remain at the investigative stage. My analysis reaches no conclusion on criminal responsibility and distinguishes judicial records from prosecutorial allegations, defense reconstructions, expert findings, journalistic accounts, and statements by the persons involved. Sources include the federal criminal file, Gendarmerie chemical reports, party submissions, official communications, press coverage, and interviews by the author. The aim is to reconstruct how observations, relationships, objects, messages, and references to foreign media came to be read together as evidence of a single coercive organization.

Legal anthropology treats a criminal file as a field of production rather than a neutral repository: documents select events, translate speech, assign classifications, and connect circumstances from different settings (Muzzopappa and Villalta 2011). In trafficking cases, this work gives practical content to “vulnerability” and affects whether an adult’s account is accepted as testimony or reinterpreted as impaired perception (Varela 2013; Martynowskyj 2019; Tarantino 2021). Here it intersected with a consolidated foreign archive. Studies in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, the earlier reconstruction by Introvigne and Vardé, and expert reports on the Russian proceedings document a substantial distance between the offenses formally adjudicated in Russia and the wider repertoire circulated by media and anti-cult activists: orgies, mind control, suicides, unidentified corpses, occult powers, narcotics, and threats to children (Introvigne and Vardé 2026; Introvigne and Šorytė 2026; Duval, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*; Šorytė, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

The distinction between a foreign judgment and the public image built around it is central. A judgment may be evaluated as background under the receiving jurisdiction’s evidentiary rules. A reputation assembled through media campaigns, anti-cult activism, official statements, and repeated unattributed allegations has a different status. The analysis traces the movement from hospital concern to prosecutorial theory, from foreign reputation to local organization, and from early media assertion to procedural persistence.

The Hospital Referral and the First Formulation

Makarova arrived in Argentina in January 2025 during the final stage of her pregnancy. According to her account, she had left a violent relationship and traveled to Bariloche to give birth in safer conditions (Introvigne and Vardé 2026). She was accompanied by Nadezhda Belyakova, a friend of her mother. Neither spoke Spanish, and Makarova spoke little English. During hospital visits, they sought help from Svetlana Komkova, a Russian and Portuguese teacher who could communicate in Spanish. Hospital personnel read this reliance as a possible sign that Makarova could not speak freely; the women described it as mutual assistance among Russian speakers in an unfamiliar medical setting.

The referral gathered observations made under those linguistic conditions. A nurse believed that Makarova appeared younger than the age recorded in her passport and attributed her limited participation to fear or submission. When Makarova gave the nurse a white rose, the gesture was interpreted as a possible coded request for help. In Makarova's account and the interviews I conducted for an earlier study, the flower was an expression of gratitude. The meaning assigned to her conduct, therefore, depended on translation, cultural interpretation, and assumptions about those relationships.

The question of the child's father introduced Rudnev's name. Makarova declined to identify her former partner and asked that the child be registered under her surname. Hospital personnel nevertheless requested paternal documentation; the nurse later acknowledged that it was not legally required for discharge but said she requested it to obtain information about Makarova. A photocopy of Rudnev's passport was produced, but the reviewed materials do not establish who supplied it or verify its provenance. Prosecutors interpreted it as part of a plan to attribute paternity to Rudnev and grant him Argentine nationality. The defense maintained that, after hospital personnel insisted on paternal papers, one woman used a copy found among documents left at the accommodation by someone who had assisted Rudnev and his wife with immigration inquiries (Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 23).

A second conflict concerned the newborn's surname. Makarova continued to request that the child bear her surname. The initial paperwork used the feminine Russian ending corresponding to the mother, and Komkova asked that it be changed to the masculine form used for a boy. The women stated that a hospital

employee tore the document during the argument. Prosecutors later presented the episode as an attempt to alter or destroy an official record and linked it to the alleged plan concerning Rudnev’s paternity (Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 24). A disagreement over Russian naming conventions was thereby entered into the file as possible evidence of falsification.

Following the cesarean delivery, police and prosecutors intervened. Makarova stated that she awoke without her telephone, separated from those on whom she relied for communication, and unable to understand the officials around her. She remained with her newborn under supervision and was later transferred to protected accommodation. The measures were recorded as state protection. In Makarova’s account, they restricted contact with her mother and with the privately retained lawyer who sought access to her and limited her ability to challenge the official description of the situation (Makarova 2025; Introvigne and Vardé 2026).

The first prosecutorial initiative concerned one Mexican and five Russian women and did not include Rudnev. After hearing Makarova and the women, Federal Guarantees Judge Gustavo Villanueva declined to authorize formalization (Federal Criminal File FGR 2878/2025 2025a). The investigation was later pursued before another judge and broadened in scope. The reviewed materials identify no complainant who described the eventual twenty-one defendants as members of a single organization. Makarova continued to deny recruitment and exploitation, stated that she had never met Rudnev, repeated that position after returning to Russia, and even requested the prosecutors’ recusal (Makarova 2025; Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 25; *Noticias Argentinas* 2025).

Assembling the Transnational Organization

On March 28, security forces detained Rudnev, his wife, and other Russian citizens at Bariloche Airport and searched rented houses, vehicles, and luggage. At the March 31 hearing, prosecutors stated that some women arrested as suspects might later be classified as victims. Defense lawyers reported that their clients did not understand the reasons for detention or the proceedings. A single Russian interpreter served numerous defendants, several of whom later stated that the hearing had not been fully translated. The judge excluded journalists and protected names and images because possible victims were among the accused, although

identifying information and detailed allegations had already reached national media (Federal Criminal File FGR 2878/2025 2025b; Balonga 2025).

During the formalization hearings of April 3–5, prosecutors accused twenty-one persons of participating in a “coercive transnational organization” concealed behind philosophy, spirituality, and yoga. The alleged offenses included aggravated trafficking for sexual exploitation and servitude, attempted alteration of the newborn’s identity, immigration offenses, and aggravated transportation of narcotics. Judge Gustavo Zapata authorized the investigation and imposed preventive detention on Rudnev. The other defendants were released subject to reporting duties and restrictions concerning travel, residence, passports, and contact (Federal Criminal File FGR 2878/2025 2025c; Ministerio Público Fiscal 2025a; 2025b).

The hearing record shows that foreign reputation supplied much of the alleged organization’s identity. Prosecutors said they had consulted “diverse sources,” including Montenegrin newspapers and the Russian conviction. Their presentation did not systematically separate conduct established in the judgment from allegations propagated by tabloids, television programs, anti-cult activists, and derivative publications.

The composite nevertheless furnished the attributes of the Argentine theory: a sexually predatory leader, psychological domination of women, control over food and property, spirituality used as concealment, and cross-border mobility. Foreign journalism did not formally become expert evidence, but it helped define the organization investigators believed they had found before the local material was properly examined.

The prosecution also referred to travel arrangements, shared accommodation, rented vehicles, covered windows, labeled utensils, stored food, clothing, manuscripts, and messages concerning diet or punishment. Defense counsel disputed the ownership, provenance, context, attribution, and translation of those items; meanwhile, the digital material was not yet available for adversarial review.

The social connections were heterogeneous: some defendants knew Rudnev or his wife, while others knew one another through travel, accommodation, or Russian-speaking networks, and several denied knowing him. The public account identified no local school with teachers, students, courses, recruitment practices, ceremonies, or a documented chain of command. “Organization” consequently

operated both as the conclusion to be demonstrated and as the frame through which any association became membership, any assistance became subordination, and any proximity became coordination.

Media Circulation and the Confirmation Loop

The first national media cycle preceded legal formalization. On March 31, *Infobae* combined “a cult from Montenegro,” “malnourished and hairless women,” and the terror of a victim in its headline. The article also questioned Makarova’s documented age and described a twenty-thousand-member movement, surrender of property, expensive yoga courses, and emaciated women surviving on leftovers (Balonga 2025). On April 1, *El País* reported that Ashram Shambhala had been discovered behind the referral, described the detainees as Rudnev’s followers fleeing toward Brazil, and stated that they possessed 130 “cocaine pills” (Rivas Molina 2025). *The Buenos Aires Herald*, *Buenos Aires Times*, and *La Nación* adopted the same narrative and repeated the narcotics claim (Ames 2025; Grainger 2025; García Pastormerlo 2025).

The apparent convergence among Russian, Montenegrin, Argentine, and later international reports concealed a circular movement of information. The attributes attached to Rudnev in Argentina had not first emerged from the Bariloche investigation. They belonged to a repertoire already consolidated in Russia, where state-aligned and opposition media alike had represented him through sexual deviance, psychological enslavement, occultism, drugs, violence, fraud, and danger to children (Šorytè, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). Montenegrin reporting reactivated the same image after local authorities encountered his name (Amicarelli, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). Argentine investigators and journalists then drew on that archive when interpreting the hospital referral and the arrests. Once the Argentine accusations were published, Russian and international outlets presented them as new confirmation of the older portrait. What appeared to be corroboration across countries was, therefore, in significant part, the recirculation of a single anti-cult figure through successive jurisdictions and media environments.

Official communications strengthened the feedback loop. The Public Prosecutor’s Office described a “coercive transnational organization” concealed behind spirituality and yoga, repeated the alleged plan involving the newborn’s

identity and Brazil, and reported that an orientative test indicated cocaine in the tablets (Ministerio Público Fiscal 2025a; 2025b). The releases described a reconstructed criminal system in the early stages of the investigation. Investigative information supplied journalists with a coherent plot; publication gave it public visibility and apparent confirmation; later, official statements circulated in which its characters and sequence were already familiar. Repetition enlarged the appearance of support without adding an independent source.

Contradictory information followed a different trajectory. Makarova's refusal of victim status was reported by national news agencies months later (*Noticias Argentinas* 2025). Negative chemical findings circulated mainly through outlets with smaller audiences, while the principal early articles and official releases remained accessible without correction of the cocaine allegation. Several defendants also described unsuccessful efforts to attract the attention of embassies and human-rights organizations after their names and photographs had been associated with trafficking, sexual exploitation, narcotics, and a "cult." Judicial measures protecting identities came after public exposure had already created a durable searchable record.

Victimhood, Contradictory Accounts, and Translation

Makarova occupied several positions in the proceedings: her hospital situation triggered the referral; she was classified as the principal victim; she was the mother involved in the registration dispute; and she was an adult whose account contradicted the prosecution's premise. Her privately retained lawyer informed the court that she did not wish to accuse anyone. A state-appointed representative argued that a person subjected to "coercive control" might not recognize herself as a victim. Prosecutors also cited messages allegedly extracted from her telephone as instructions to deny victimization and Rudnev's responsibility (Federal Criminal File FGR 2878/2025 2025c).

The hearing did not establish that Rudnev sent those messages or instructed another person to send them. Defense counsel objected that their extraction, authorship, context, and translation had not been available for adversarial review. Even so, the messages were used to interpret Makarova's denial as instructed, while her repeated refusal of victim status was regarded as compatible with the

coercion hypothesis. Other women denied belonging to a Rudnev-led spiritual group or being victims, and most denied knowing him. Prosecutors and judges are not required to accept such denials at face value. But contrary statements must still retain probative force. If the accusation confirms exploitation and the refusal to accuse is also treated as evidence of domination, the classification ceases to be tested by the person’s account and instead absorbs it.

Argentine scholarship on anti-trafficking practices helps locate this problem without presuming in advance whether the prosecution or the women’s accounts should prevail. Varela’s analysis of the interpretive process through which “vulnerability” becomes legally recognizable shows that victimhood is constructed through the selection and ordering of signs (Varela 2013). Martynowskyj’s formulation of women who experience themselves as being “accused of being victims” names the procedural position produced when disagreement no longer functions as contrary evidence but is reintroduced as a symptom requiring expert interpretation (Martynowskyj 2019). Tarantino’s critique of protective-punitive frameworks further clarifies the risk that assistance may restrict the agency it claims to restore (Tarantino 2021). In this case, the issue is how much evidentiary weight remained available to Makarova’s statements once the official hypothesis had classified her refusal as part of the coercive situation itself.

Language and translation formed part of the evidentiary problem from the outset. Hospital exchanges relied on companions, telephone applications, improvised interpretation, and a remote translator. One interpreter served numerous defendants at the hearings, and several later reported incomplete translations. Messages and handwritten texts were invoked while their linguistic contexts remained disputed. One year after formalization, prosecutors requested twelve additional months because digital material still required translation and most devices had not been fully examined (Ministerio Público Fiscal 2026a). At the extension hearing, the prosecution acknowledged having used Google Lens and stated that an official translation was now required (Federal Criminal File FGR 2878/2025 2026). In a case where command, obedience, punishment, and coercion were inferred from words, translation was part of the evidentiary infrastructure. Provisional and unaudited linguistic interpretations had already helped sustain the accusation, organize the alleged hierarchy, and justify coercive measures before reliable translation became available.

Narcotics, Detention, and Procedural Persistence

The narcotics allegation offers the clearest chronology of a public claim surviving technical contradiction. Authorities seized 131 tablets from two women at the airport. The existence of an initial orientative test was presented publicly and procedurally as an indication that the tablets contained cocaine. Gendarmerie Chemical Report no. 135491, however, analyzed samples and was signed on April 3, 2025, before the formalization hearing. It expressly excluded cocaine and MDMA. That evening, prosecutors nevertheless told the court that the women had attempted to transport “131 pills containing cocaine,” and the narcotics charge was formalized. A second report, no. 136132, dated May 14, found no controlled psychotropic or narcotic substances in nineteen dried-mushroom samples and three liquids seized during searches (Gendarmería Nacional Argentina 2025a; 2025b; Federal Criminal File FGR 2878/2025 2025c).

By the time the negative findings could have corrected the case’s public framing, the cocaine allegation had already become part of the story through *El País*, *La Nación*, the *Buenos Aires Herald*, and official prosecutorial communication (Ames 2025; Rivas Molina 2025; García Pastormerlo 2025; Ministerio Público Fiscal 2025a; 2025b). The major early reports were not corrected, producing an evidentiary split: the forensic record no longer supported the narcotics claim, but the media and institutional narrative continued to associate the alleged organization with drug transportation.

After formalization in April 2025, Rudnev was the only defendant held in preventive detention and was transferred to Federal Prison Unit No. 6 in Rawson. Medical submissions later documented substantial weight loss, fainting, respiratory episodes, adverse effects attributed to medication, and requests for specialist examinations (Vardé 2026; Federal Criminal File FGR 2878/2025 2026). On January 21, 2026, Judge Zapata granted house arrest on health grounds. The prosecution appealed, disputing the medical basis and invoking flight risk; on January 28, the Review Court revoked the measure pending further assessment (Ramírez Aburto 2026a; Villalba 2026).

At the April 1 extension hearing, when the prosecution requested another twelve months to investigate, the court extended the investigation and Rudnev’s preventive detention until April 2027 (Ministerio Público Fiscal 2026a). On April

23, a review panel ordered detention at a residence in San Vicente, subject to electronic monitoring, a bond, and restrictive conditions. The prosecution appealed, relying on flight risk, alleged economic capacity, and the organization’s supposed international reach. The appeal was rejected on May 5, and Rudnev was transferred to house arrest in mid-May (Ministerio Público Fiscal 2026b; Ramirez Aburto 2026b).

On June 4, 2026, the Federal Court of Criminal Cassation granted the prosecution’s complaint and revoked Rudnev’s house arrest. The ruling referred to the tablets as substances that “presumably” contained psychotropics and treated their simultaneous transportation as support for a coordinated organization. The narcotics allegation was not incidental. Along with the alleged transnational structure, Rudnev’s presumed leadership, and flight risk, it contributed to the court’s assessment that the case involved seriousness and organizational capacity incompatible with house arrest. The decision did not address the completed Gendarmerie reports that excluded illegal substances (Cámara Federal de Casación Penal 2026). Although house arrest was revoked, implementation was subject to medical exams because Rudnev had recently undergone surgery. In July, while still electronically monitored, he was urgently admitted to the Naval Hospital following postoperative deterioration (Ministerio Público Fiscal 2026c; *Bariloche2000* 2026).

The evidentiary effects were unequal. Negative laboratory results altered the forensic record but did not displace drugs from the judicial description of the organization’s dangerousness. Meanwhile, untranslated, encrypted, and unexamined material was expected to substantiate the theory later and was invoked to prolong investigation and detention in the present. A technically contradicted allegation remained available, while evidence not yet produced continued to function as anticipated confirmation.

Conclusion

The proceedings began with a hospital referral formulated under difficult linguistic and intercultural conditions and expanded once Rudnev’s name connected it to a transnational anti-cult archive. Russian and Montenegrin representations supplied a recognizable “leader” and a repertoire of abuse, psychological control, deprivation, narcotics, and concealed spirituality.

Argentine investigators associated that repertoire with the hospital encounter, migration plans, travel, accommodation, objects, and messages whose translation and context remained disputed. National media then reported the hypothesis as the discovery of a known criminal system, while later foreign coverage returned the Argentine accusations as apparent confirmation.

The legal-anthropological issue is not that such associations were impossible to investigate, but that facts of different origin and status were made coherent before their evidentiary conditions had been stabilized. Assistance with translation could be read as control; migrant support networks as organizational membership; disagreement with victim status as impaired perception; and objects whose evidentiary meaning depended on disputed attribution and context as signs of hierarchy. These interpretations required attribution, context, reliable translation, and revision in light of contrary evidence. Yet the organizational frame persisted while central digital material remained inaccessible or untranslated, the principal alleged victim rejected the status assigned to her, and state laboratory reports contradicted the most widely reported narcotics allegation.

The analysis does not substitute a defense narrative for the prosecution's account. It preserves distinctions indispensable to judicial and public evaluation: an allegation's provenance and its repetition; an orientative indication and a confirmatory examination; a foreign reputation produced within a politically inflected anti-cult and media environment and conduct established in Argentina; protective classification and proof that an adult cannot describe her own experience. Institutional classifications are necessary for legal intervention, but their authority depends on the evidence through which they are produced and contested.

Foreign media reports first served as investigative leads, then as interpretive context, and finally, through Argentine reporting and official communication, as apparent corroboration. The image of the transnational "cult leader" was complete within days. More than a year later, investigators were still translating and assessing material said to sustain it; Makarova continued to reject the status assigned to her; and a narcotics allegation excluded by state expert reports remained present in a detention decision. Once a penal narrative becomes durable, repetition can conceal an unstable evidentiary base, and the passage of time itself may become one of the penalties imposed by the process.

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The Esoteric Teachings of Konstantin Rudnev and Why They Led to Controversy

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the spiritual framework of the “Ashram Shambhala” teachings to provide a concise overview of the mythical and narrative dimensions of Konstantin Rudnev’s ideas. Rooted in Rudnev’s prior experiences in contemporary esotericism, New Age, and shamanistic practices, and deeply embedded in Eastern philosophies, yoga, and meditation, the spiritual narrative of “Ashram Shambhala” is best understood as a complex system of religious bricolage oriented toward self-improvement and the elevation of consciousness. Konstantin Rudnev’s current incarceration is partially due to a lack of proper understanding of this unique tapestry of metaphysical concepts and bodily practices. This study aims to partially address this lack of academic knowledge by outlining narrative standpoints, relevant overlaps with other religious and spiritual traditions, and spiritual-metaphysical arguments, whose misreading—whether intentional or unconscious—may lead to wrongful depictions.

KEYWORDS: Konstantin Rudnev; Ashram Shambhala; New Religious Movements; Esotericism in Russia; Anti-Cult Movements.

Introduction

Konstantin Rudnev’s spiritual system can only be properly understood in light of his upbringing and prior exposure to a select plurality of religious and spiritual traditions. Inspired by a diverse collective of faiths, spiritualities, and ways of inner cultivation—such as hatha yoga (हठ योगे), asana (आसन), Siberian shamanism, various tantric practices, “conspiratorial” elements of UFO and extraterrestrial beliefs, as well as “magical” practices such as “astral karate,” taught by Valery Averyanov (a.k.a. Guru Var Avera)—Rudnev articulated his metaphysical system, “Sekoru Dharma.” The movement that gathered around him holds that all religions contain partial truths. Still, only the enlightened can see the “full picture” (Darshan[s], I, 127–38).

Cosmology and Metaphysical Framework

It is difficult to deconstruct the spiritual narrative of “Ashram Shambhala,” the name some students gave to Rudnev’s community and school, even though he never incorporated an organization by that name. Among the relevant points of reference are the use of the Gyud/Guida Method (particularly hypnosis), Sampo (Rudnev’s version of Astral Karate), the Field of Love, Tantra and Maithuna (sometimes spelled “Maithkuna”)—contextualized as engagement with the divine sexual energies (Cusack and Prior 2016)—and Orphism (artistic means and expressions for creating spiritual resonance).

Rudnev has a unique understanding of death, interpreted as the transformation of consciousness. At the same time, life is seen as a temporary experience (mostly framed by suffering) intended to help the soul gain an early understanding of existence before reincarnation. The ultimate goal is to achieve the ideal form (referred to as the Warrior of Light) of awareness that could resist societal norms, commit to cultivation over several cycles of incarnation, and elevate the innermost godly consciousness to the level of emptiness and objective observance, stripping away the residual elements of prior incarnations.

Rudnev’s cosmology outlines four divinities—not worshipped, but symbolic—each associated with a distinct concept of temporality. Tengri-khan embodies eternity and resides in the high heavens. Ulgen-khan represents the future and foresight. Umai embodies the ever-present. Erlik-khan is the symbolic manifestation of the past and the underworld. Inspired by Siberian shamanism, this cosmology exhibits both a vertical axis and a temporal dimension.

Mirroring this, Rudnev’s metaphysics of the soul consists of a similar fourfold differentiation, with an additional overlapping fifth component. As Introvigne and Vardé have noted, this fivefold unity affirms that

a person is not a single, unified being but a composite of five souls, each responsible for different modes of perception or life force. *Aiy* connects the person to eternity; *Bosy* perceives the future; *Tes* perceives the past; *Sur* travels between worlds; and *Kut* energizes the body with life (Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 11).

Framed in a similar fourfold distinction, the levels of conscious existence (referred to as the Tiers of Life) are also outlined in Rudnev’s teachings (Darshan[s] n.d. I, 101–5). Spiritual practices are presented as the “keys” to

moving up these tiers, corresponding to a person's intellectual, emotional, and higher centers.

Complementing the fourfold soul concept, Darshan 1 also outlines a nuanced body concept, akin to matryoshka dolls, that inherently links the body and the spiritual essence within it in seven layers (Darshan[s] n.d., I, 153–63). The “Nirvanic Body” separates Atman (the particle of God) from the whole God, therefore creating the illusion of separateness, while in fact God is universal and indivisible. In this regard, Rudnev's system shares some structural similarities with Hinduism, while its articulation also inspired other neo-Tantric groups (Introvigne 2022, 36–51).

Atman is wrapped in the Causal Body, which accumulates over millions of lives, forming an individual's unique experience and individuality. While it provides experience, it also creates limitations, as a person identifies with these accumulated experiences rather than the godly essential consciousness beneath.

The third layer is the Mental Body, which forms during one's current life and accumulates a person's thoughts, ideas, and concepts. It is where a false personality, or self-image, is formed under the influence of others. However, its “higher parts” can develop through philosophical thought and questioning one's identity. This layer is one of the key spheres of the school's spiritual activities.

The Mental Body is surrounded by the Astral Body, where emotions—both sublime and negative, such as conscience, love, and compassion, as well as resentment and irritation—reside. According to Rudnev's teachings, cultivating positive emotions strengthens the Astral Body, whereas immersing oneself in negative emotions weakens it.

The following layer is the Vital Body, associated with animalistic emotions, instinctive reactions, and low-level desires such as fear, aggression, greed for food, and lust. It also serves as a reservoir of energy necessary for life. A strong Vital Body, developed through leadership and social activity, provides the energy for assertiveness and growth, fostering a strong Yang (active, dictating) identity.

The three layers previously noted (the Mental, Astral, and Vital Bodies) develop during an incarnation and contribute to the causal body after death. The Etheric Body is the sixth layer, where “biological energy” is stored. It supports biological processes such as energy production, cell division, and other

physiological functions. It contains the noted energy channels and acupuncture points and supports the body's physical functions. A healthy lifestyle helps maintain a strong Etheric Body. The outermost shell is the Physical Body, consisting of bones, muscles, spine, and organs. It is described as limiting the soul and creating "blockages" that prevent the manifestation of subtle abilities. Overcoming the influence of this physical body and its desires is a crucial step in spiritual development.

Rudnev's Esoteric Teachings: The Darshans

Understanding Rudnev's teachings requires deeper familiarity with key primary texts, including the 11-volume "Darshans." These resources are written in a dialogical form (originally in Russian and later translated into English), featuring stories he tells in response to his students' inquiries, while explaining fundamental holistic principles and guiding his followers in inner development. Some questions are pragmatic, such as proper ways of meditation and preferred forms of collective behavior. Others address more complex philosophical questions about existence, suffering, and the nature of the world.

The full corpus of the Darshans is extensive, totaling over 5,700 pages, not including supplementary materials. For this study, my inquiry focused on four entries in the series: Darshan 1, 2, 10, and a theme-specific supplementary entry, Darshan Tantra. These entries provide rich information on several controversial subjects, including opposing perspectives on controlling social systems and unique understandings of the use and significance of sexual energies.

"Incorrect Thinking" and Its Social Implications

A major obstacle to spiritual growth, as noted by Rudnev, is "incorrect thinking," which must be overcome through gradual immersion in the Teacher's lessons (Darshan[s] n.d., I, 112–13). Such a state may be instilled by upbringing and reinforced by societal conditioning.

The first step in liberating oneself is to identify and challenge beliefs that cause suffering, such as the belief that being offended itself causes suffering. By replacing incorrect thoughts with correct ones, individuals gain self-control, loosen

identification with thoughts, and begin to see themselves as separate from their thinking. This process, described as a “universal exercise,” is twofold: it addresses the “pain” caused by conventional guilt and by a higher sense of guilt before one’s Higher Self. Rudnev notes—referring to himself as the Teacher, Keeper of Knowledge, or Sage—that repentance is the foundation for awakening conscience, which serves as an inner guide or “inner Guru.”

Self-Knowledge and the Atman

While many of Rudnev’s teachings present the “Know yourself” method as a primary step, Rudnev’s approach to self-knowledge begins by separating oneself from all thoughts and by understanding “who is not me.” This severance involves recognizing that anything one can observe—the body, emotions, thoughts—is “not me,” but rather external elements or remnants of past incarnations or experiences.

The “I” is identified as a detached observer, one whose self-knowledge involves separating from false personalities and external influences. Considered unchanging, perfect, and part of God, the Atman is within the body.

Social Implications

According to Rudnev, societal morality suppresses natural positive emotions and instills negativity, making it difficult to hear one’s “inner Guru.” Conditioning by parents, teachers, and the media enforces behaviors such as materialism, defined as the “golden calf,” and egoism fed by negative emotions (Darshan[s] n.d., I, 7–11), subjective beliefs (“rose-colored glasses”: Darshan[s] n.d., I, 11–2), or a “blackened” view of life (Darshan[s] n.d., I, 12–3), as well as false personalities, leading to a loss of one’s true self (Darshan[s] n.d., I, 14–32).

Rudnev’s views may be perceived as threatening to existing power structures and societal control because they challenge individuals to free themselves from systemic oppression. In Rudnev’s Novosibirsk trial, such sentiments were recast in legal terms as “extremism,” a reductive misreading of the philosophical messages of spiritual liberation and reconnection with one’s innermost spirit as “anarchism.”

Purpose of Life – Guided Cultivation with an Anchor

According to Rudnev's teachings, the purpose of life on Earth is a journey of refinement, in which mistakes are opportunities for growth. Amid the challenges, the Teacher's (Rudnev's) role is crucial in explaining the meaning of "truths" and in guiding students toward spiritual advancement.

The path to freedom involves recognizing and disentangling oneself from the roles and influences imposed by society, with the help of a Teacher and a global community of like-minded individuals.

Meditation and conscious practices are presented here as means of stopping internal dialogue and achieving a state of silence, allowing one to see reality objectively and eliminate disturbing or "noisemaking" elements.

Sublime States

The observation of objective reality is closely connected to Rudnev's concept of sublime states, which have several parallels with those described by George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866–1949) (Petsche 2014, 127–48). These are mostly positive inner experiences of purification and the elevation of consciousness. Through inner journeys, negative emotions can also be transformed into positive, sublime ones.

Internally experienced negative emotions serve as "wake-up bells," signaling that something requires self-reflection and correction. Without vigilance and an "anchor" in consciousness, this can destroy inner well-being (Darshan[s] n.d., I, 63–4). The process is illustrated in the Darshans as a cart pulled by three horses (symbolizing the instinctive, emotional, and sexual centers) and ridden by a drunken coachman (symbolizing the mind) (Darshan[s] n.d., I, 37–8).

Connected to sublime states, Darshans also outline anomalies that produce negative consciousness: these arise from malfunctions in the body's emotional, intellectual, motor, and sexual centers, as certain centers become dominant over others. Such states can be corrected only through self-observation (Darshan[s] n.d., I, 112–13).

Sexual Energy and Sacred Eroticism

In 2010, during Rudnev's first arrest, leading Russian anti-cultist Alexander Dvorkin gave an interview to *Pravda.ru* about Ashram Shambhala, describing it as "one of the most notorious totalitarian cults" and portraying Rudnev as a sadistic "swindler" and "conman." He also offered elaborate—yet utterly misunderstood and, in several respects, factually incorrect—summaries of Ashram Shambhala's spiritual practices, noting that members were emotionally and physically abused, humiliated, and forced to "participate in collective sexual orgies" (Gumanova 2010).

Despite these claims being factually incorrect, the social stigma surrounding Rudnev's movement persisted, resulting in significant social pressure wherever Rudnev relocated. These accusations are not unique and have frequently targeted spiritual movements whose teachings include sacred eroticism, as outlined by Introvigne (2022, 50–62; 2025).

Rudnev's understanding of sexual energies is evidently richer than Dvorkin's report outlines. Sexual tension is regarded as a high-vibration energy, linked to creativity and the manifestation of the sublime emotions noted above. It can be channeled for higher spiritual development, but when misdirected, it leads to negative emotions and destructive outcomes. As Rudnev notes, when misused, it "no longer goes to creation, does not pass into the most exalted state, but goes down, destroys, reduces to the worm" (Darshan[s] n.d., II, 261).

Rudnev places sexual energies on a scale, with frigidity at the lowest level, indicating low or absent sexual energy and a life primarily dictated by societal programming. In contrast, excessive sexual energy, if uncontrolled, can push individuals toward undesirable situations such as prostitution or unhealthy fantasies (Rudnev n.d., 17–8). Relationship roles are also framed by a dichotomous typology of sexual energies, with Yang representing the active, dictating party and Yin symbolizing the receptive, submissive traits. These are not explicitly connected to either femininity or masculinity, which explains how societal roles can lead to both "masculine" women and "feminine" men.

To work effectively with sexual energy, tantric abstinence and total self-control are considered necessary. This involves accumulating a significant amount of (sexual) energy, as working with small amounts is considered ineffective. Abstinence is not only a bodily act here but also an intellectual and spiritual

struggle, meaning controlling one's imagination (i.e., avoiding stray thoughts) to prevent sexual images that can lead to discharges and energy loss during sleep.

Sans-Connections

Another key concept in sexual energies is creating “sans-connections” that allow energy and information to flow between partners. “Darshan Tantra” emphasizes choosing suitable partners, as negative connections can drain a person's energy and well-being rather than enrich them. This is described as “energetic vampirism” (Darshan[s] n.d., X, 1178). Those who participate while ill or in negative emotional states may transfer negative energy to their partners.

Increasing divorce rates are presented as a positive sign that people are becoming more self-aware and refusing to endure unsuitable relationships—an indicator of “selectivity” and understanding in choosing partners. The proper functioning of the three levels of the Sexual Center (Svadhithana Chakra)—the mechanical, emotional, and intellectual—shifts “being in love” toward the emotional rather than the physical. At the same time, the above-noted sense of selectivity is a further step, prioritizing energetic compatibility over emotional compatibility.

The holistic-integrative attitude of the teachings is evident when contrasted with those of ISKCON and other neo-Vedic movements, which are criticized for focusing on a single chakra rather than on a holistic self. The syncretic bricolage also becomes visible in the connections and reflections on Qigong and in the parallels drawn between the lower Dantian (one of the three energy centers for the flow of qi) and the lower abdominal positionality of the Svadhithana Chakra (Rudnev n.d., 67–8).

Rudnev's spiritual narrative also describes sexual minorities, contextualized within these frameworks as the results of discrepancies between physical bodies, hormonal systems, and subtle energies. Rudnev critiques and rejects the condemnation of these groups, seeing it as another channel of aggressive societal control (Rudnev n.d., 44–7). Interestingly, an exclusivist approach to family and marriage is also viewed from a disapproving angle, interpreted as aligned with totalitarian state ideology and designed to make people dependent and

controllable, while contrasting it with individuality, which often emerges among youth due to strong sexual energy and the lack of being tied down.

Sexual Consciousness

Rudnev challenges the notion that human reproduction is always beneficial to nature, arguing that overpopulation is a contemporary concern that leads to resource depletion and environmental pollution. Rudnev also contends that population growth is encouraged only by state powers that benefit from cheap labor and soldiers. Advocating policies that limit reproduction, Rudnev presents ecological arguments, noting negative effects such as cramped living conditions and increased waste (Rudnev n.d., 52).

Rudnev notes that although some developed countries implement birth restrictions, high birth rates persist in regions marked by strong religious fanaticism and state control, including countries in the Middle East. He also criticizes societal conditioning that pressures women to marry and have children, often leading to relationships that cause suffering for all parties. Female infertility is seen as a “blessing from God” rather than a tragedy (Rudnev n.d., 58–9). Societal indoctrination is presented as the reason for negative beliefs about infertility, while, in reality, infertility is the ideal setting for exploring higher states of consciousness. By contrast, Rudnev commends the merits of in vitro fertilization (IVF), clarifying that children conceived through this method do have souls, while criticizing mainline religions that oppose such scientific advancements.

Tantra vs. Sex

Rudnev distinguishes between instinctive, quick sex aimed at reproduction and conscious, prolonged sexual activity specific to tantric practice. In his view, the latter is not driven by an instinctual fear of predators (i.e., an animalistic instinct for DNA transfer).

The physiological purpose of orgasm in women is interpreted as a signal for male ejaculation, underscoring the importance of women’s energy in the ritual process. According to the Darshans, harnessing this energy and consciously directing it

toward creativity and spiritual growth prevents it from being wasted on mere reproduction, which is viewed as an animalistic and instinctual form of interaction.

In conscious tantric acts, the three levels of the Sexual Center interact through lust, pleasure, and energy conservation. At the same time, the Intellectual Center attunes the other centers to the experience of exalted states through prayer, contemplation of icons, listening to divine music, and other exercises. These activities are “organized” by the Intellectual Center so that all the other centers may attune themselves to exalted emotions.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, Tantra is defined as “the art of life,” “true knowledge,” and a solution to real-life challenges—a comprehensive approach to harmonious living and spiritual development that spans everything from eating and breathing to yoga and sexual intercourse. Rudnev sharply distinguishes between sex as discussed in tantric contexts and in conventional societal discourse, where religious teachings suppress or misrepresent it.

Contrary to Dvorkin’s narrative, Rudnev asserts that these tantric rituals are not “orgies” but ascetic practices that require fully conscious, affirmative participation and control over energy, aimed at serving divine energy rather than personal desires. In these contexts, true Maithuna is considered not merely a means of satisfaction but also a path to meditation and a means of achieving total control over the mind, body, and emotions, complemented by the elevation of Kundalini energy.

In Rudnev’s spiritual teachings, the ultimate goal of Tantra is not Maithuna itself but “orgasm with the Universe,” or “Shri Mahamudra,” which signifies holistic unity with the entire world and the elevation of practitioners’ conscious existence. During this state, they awaken and reconnect with their inner Atman (Rudnev n.d., 137).

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Practices of Liberation: Secret Knowledge and Relations of Power in Konstantin Rudnev's Teachings

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes selected elements of Konstantin Rudnev's teachings, focusing on how esoteric concepts, practices, and cosmological models form an integrated system of spiritual transformation. Drawing on the corpus of Darshans and related materials, the study situates Rudnev's ideas within the broader field of Western esotericism, highlighting themes such as secrecy, graded revelation, the transmission of knowledge from master to disciple, and the cultivation of awareness through work on thought, emotions, and bodily attitudes. Central to the system is the notion of "incorrect thinking," presented as both a spiritual obstacle and a mechanism of social conditioning imposed by family, institutions, and the state. The analysis examines Rudnev's distinctive synthesis of Tantric elements, including the role of sexual energy, the critique of orgasm, and ritual structures that emphasize internal redirection rather than physical expression. It also explores cosmological components such as planetary influences, cosmic laws, and Egregors, which frame everyday experience within broader spiritual dynamics. The article argues that practices in this system function not merely as techniques but as ways of perceiving and organizing reality according to Rudnev's esoteric worldview.

KEYWORDS: Ashram Shambhala, Konstantin Rudnev, Tantra, Esotericism in Russia, New Religious Movements in Russia, Tantric Views of Sexual Energy.

Introduction

The materials presenting the teachings of Konstantin Rudnev exhibit numerous characteristics of a new religious movement. They can also be analyzed using the categories developed in the study of Western esotericism. In addition to direct or indirect references to various religious traditions, Rudnev's teachings include concepts typical of esoteric currents, such as the transmission of knowledge from an enlightened master to disciples, the gradual revelation of teachings, and the existence of other worlds and intermediary beings. They can also be considered from the perspective of countercultural currents, which constitute one of the analytical frameworks used in this kind of study. Secrecy and the selective

transmission of knowledge often constitute central categories for understanding the organization, authority, and self-conceptualization of esoteric movements (Faivre 1994; Bogdan 2007; Hanegraaff 2025). In this context, the distinction between what is revealed and what remains hidden is not only a structural feature of the movements but also part of their conceptual framework.

These ideas are closely linked to practices aimed at transformation across multiple levels, including thought, emotions, bodily attitudes, and life choices. In movements that draw on Tantric traditions, practices may also include activities related to sexual energy, including its transmission, cultivation, and application. Such approaches often face social misunderstanding because they intersect two sensitive domains: sexuality and religion (Introvigne 2005, 2022). However, these practices cannot be examined in isolation from the beliefs that underpin them (for a discussion of the reception of Tantric elements in Western contexts, see Urban 2006, 2015; Strube 2022).

At the same time, Rudnev's teachings represent a distinctive form of synthesis, in which various elements take on meanings specific to this system. This is evident, for example, in his interpretation of astrology, which differs from approaches found in other contemporary currents. The teachings also include ideas concerning war, Dark Powers, and various forms of external influence on human existence. This article examines selected elements of Rudnev's teachings and the practices connected with them, focusing on the relationship between esoteric concepts and their practical manifestations.

Initiation into Darshans

The majority of the movement's teachings are presented through eleven books of Darshans (Darshan[s] n.d.), which range from introductory to advanced topics and are intended for students at progressively higher levels of development. Beyond the form of the teachings, they all share certain elements, such as the opening statement:

Attention!
This book bears a special code.
The more times you read it,
the sooner all your problems will be solved.

Reading texts on spiritual teachings is presented as transformative and as constituting a form of initiation in itself. The opening statement employs a specific rhetorical strategy: although it takes the form of a warning, it warns “against” something readers would presumably seek to achieve—the solution of their problems. It thus encourages repeated engagement with the texts while presenting them as containing meanings and effects that unfold gradually through continued reading. In this sense, repeated reading itself becomes one of the practices through which engagement with the teachings is cultivated.

At the same time, unlike esoteric texts intentionally constructed as complex symbolic systems accessible only to initiates, Rudnev’s Darshans employ a highly accessible style. Their narrative structure, through which teachings are gradually introduced, facilitates sustained engagement and allows the texts to remain readable for a broad audience.

The Hidden Knowledge and Its Causes

The belief that “you are not your mind” is central to Rudnev’s teachings. It is, in fact, not new. The idea of distancing oneself from one’s own thinking, remaining in the “now” in a state of presence rather than in the noise of thoughts, and observing those thoughts is a technique known, among others, in Buddhism. In the West, it periodically gains popularity in self-development literature, with Eckhart Tolle’s *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* serving as a prominent example (Tolle 1997). First published in 1997, the book had, by 2025, been translated into 33 languages and sold 16 million copies. The topic of distancing oneself from one’s own mind, along with simple exercises intended to facilitate this process, has undoubtedly achieved international recognition.

In Rudnev’s system, the subject is invited to similar attention, but with a specific nuance. Thinking occupies a central position in the system. More precisely, *incorrect thinking* and the struggle against it are central (Rudnev n.d.a, 5). Other methods of practice, such as deep meditation or the specific form of meditation often referred to as “The Dot” (*Trataka*), also lead to various changes; however, these changes may occur very slowly or not at all (Rudnev n.d.a, 16).

By contrast, focusing on thinking and its consequences produces immediately observable effects. Fighting incorrect thinking makes people stop acting like slaves. Both the family and the state are presented as forces that impose incorrect thinking and reduce individual choices to socially prescribed patterns of behavior.

According to Rudnev, there are two main reasons this knowledge is not widely accessible. “For... two reasons, this method is, so to speak, unpopular, hidden, or shared only with certain people,” states one of the texts summarizing Rudnev’s ideas, titled *The Main Ideas of the Teaching* in the form of questions and answers (Rudnev n.d.a, 16). What, then, are these reasons?

The first relates to the environments in which traditional meditative practices developed, such as monasteries and caves, which are not easily accessible. Second, working with incorrect thinking reveals patterns and forms of conditioning imposed by society and the state, whose punitive reaction would be immediate (Rudnev n.d.a, 16). Thus, the decisive factors are historical and socio-political. The negative role of political pressure appears as a particularly prominent theme in other writings presenting Rudnev’s ideas (Darshan[s] n.d., I, 53–60; 2, 6–16; Rudnev n.d.b, 6–8, 73–5).

This simple activity is among the most powerful practices in the teachings. The idea of changing incorrect thinking is simple in theory, yet it is widely regarded as socially and politically unacceptable. However, changing one’s way of thinking and moving beyond imposed patterns does not imply active rebellion. Rather, it involves restraint, self-discipline, and refraining from certain actions.

Wars and Dark Powers—A Spiritual Minority Against the System

Rudnev’s *Darshan Tantra* is a peculiar text. It clearly illustrates one of the central themes of the other eleven Darshans, which is unusual in the broader context of Western neo-Tantric texts: war. The principal concern of the Darshan Tantra is the imbalance of power, state policies, and the consequences they produce, particularly the pressure placed on individuals to participate in wars. The word “war” appears thirty-nine times in the text, accompanied by six references to the military.

War is not understood as an exceptional event detached from the ordinary functioning of the state. Rather, it represents the culmination of a process in which the social system becomes so thoroughly subjugated that individuals are compelled—or manipulated into voluntarily consenting—to sacrifice their lives, health, and vital energy to political authority during armed conflict (Rudnev n.d.b, 7, 54, 102, 134). In this sense, war constitutes the highest expression of both individual and collective subjugation (Rudnev n.d.b, 50-61). The work with sexual energy can stop wars (Rudnev n.d.b, 65, 103). This points to the next dimension of practices.

At the same time, as numerous examples throughout the text illustrate, the more totalitarian the regime, the more extensive its encroachments on individual freedom and the rights of various minority groups (Rudnev n.d.b, 44). Minorities—whether religious, cultural, sexual, or otherwise—embody alternative ways of living that exist outside the dominant system and its prescribed patterns of behavior, which the system cannot tolerate. Being part of a minority can be (but is not necessarily) a step toward spiritual development outside the state's programs.

Sexual Energy and Orgasm as Castration

The Tantric lectures in *Darshan Tantra* are described as taking place (symbolically) “in the very ancient Khajuraho Temple” (Rudnev n.d.b, 4). Before entering, the disciples contemplate the erotic sculptures adorning the temple walls. The Khajuraho Temple is indeed a temple complex in India famous for its erotic depictions, though these account for only about 10% of the sculptures as a whole (Desai 1996), with the remaining works depicting various other scenes from everyday life. Moreover, the relationship between these erotic representations and Tantra is by no means self-evident, although some scholars have suggested it (Rabe 2000).

The temple is referenced numerous times throughout the text (e.g., Rudnev n.d.b, 3, 4, 14–5, 33, 42, 61, 81, 138). It assumes its most prominent role in the opening sections—serving as an indispensable backdrop and introduction to sexual energy and the function of eroticism in primordial religion—and in the final part of the book, where the author focuses on the levels of initiation and describes the dance of the priestess within this temple (Rudnev n.d.b, 146–75).

The Sage solemnly declared to his pupils that “During that time, people possessed the Ancient True Knowledge. They understood that sexual energy could be used for spiritual development and union with God” (Rudnev n.d.b, 4). Thus, at the outset, the central theme of the work emerges: sexual energy as a forgotten means of attaining spiritual development, whose ultimate goal is union with God.

An important distinction must be made between the sexual act itself and sexual energy (Rudnev n.d.b, 3–15). In Rudnev’s work, the primary emphasis is on sexual energy rather than on sexual intercourse. Although *maithuna* (sexual union) is presented as the pinnacle of tantric practice (Rudnev n.d.b, 135–36), the focus is not on the sexual act itself. For those who practice with awareness, sex is never truly about sex. Orgasm is regarded as an absolute waste of energy from both a spiritual and a personal perspective (Rudnev n.d.b, 25–28, 100–102), and, on the physical level, as a kind of temporary castration (Rudnev n.d.b, 122).

Sexual energy is considered the most important—or at least one of the most important—energies available to human beings. Various practices serve as means of raising the level of this energy. Their purpose, however, is not to discharge it outwardly, but rather to redirect it toward internal centers (Rudnev n.d.b, 14, 66, 134).

Techniques Described in “Darshan Tantra”

What is usually considered by opponents to be problematic, immoral, or otherwise controversial in the source materials of Tantric groups is the set of techniques described. Anyone seeking such controversy within *Darshan Tantra* will, however, be rather disappointed. The techniques can be divided into those explicitly described, those merely mentioned, and those absent from the text. We learn that Tantric techniques can be practiced individually, in couples, with “Onomae” (“It is a being from the subtle world – our second half, our opposite-gender counterpart, which exists on the astral level”: Rudnev n.d.b, 115), in groups, or even independently, on the astral plane—the latter being the most difficult yet a highly effective approach (Rudnev n.d.b, 142–43).

While “standard” intercourse may result in a physical child, the redirection of energy can generate other, subtler bodies. It is precisely these subtle bodies that serve as the vehicle toward the ultimate goal; thus, action initiated through them is

deemed superior to action originating from the physical body (which, inherently, also engages the other bodies).

The reader is presented with descriptions of five stages of the Tantric ritual: the first is *Mansa*, a tea ceremony (Rudnev n.d.b, 138). The second is *Mudra*, during which students pair off, sit face-to-face, and hold hands to form an energetic circle (Rudnev n.d.b, 139). The third is *Madhyama-natya*, a specialized circle dance. The fourth stage, *Matya*, is designated for advanced practitioners and incorporates both dance and touch (Rudnev n.d.b, 140). The fifth and final stage is *Maithuna*, which involves sexual contact (Rudnev n.d.b, 141). Aside from these examples, which are condensed into a mere four pages of a book spanning over 170 pages, very few techniques are explicitly described.

The text addresses questions regarding how to manage sexual energy upon its arousal. One should welcome this energy and direct it toward other centers. One method of achieving this is through prayer or dancing (Rudnev n.d.b, 11, 24). Indeed, prayer is portrayed as a highly undervalued practice (Rudnev n.d.b, 80–5). If an individual's energy is already concentrated in the lower body and they wish to elevate it, one viable method is to perform squats or other exercises (Rudnev n.d.b, 101).

Furthermore, the book posits that women possess ninety percent of Svadhisthana—the sexual center that holds sexual energy—whereas men hold only ten percent (Rudnev n.d.b, 158). The energetic connection (“sans-connection”) established during sexual intercourse persists even if the partners separate or divorce (Rudnev n.d.b, 36), with the man continuously draining the woman of her energy. Consequently, severing these connections is deemed crucial (a doctrine this group shares with other Tantric movements, such as the Path of YahRa: Introvigne 2019). Although in *Darshan Tantra* the Sage promises to discuss these practices later, the book never reveals which specific techniques may lead to the cessation of these bonds.

Finally, while the redirection of energy and the criticism of orgasm are recurring themes throughout the work, the concept of semen retention—along with specific techniques aimed at achieving it, on which a large Tantric and neo-Tantric literature exists—is never explicitly introduced.

Beyond Books

Beyond the written teachings, Rudnev's students have produced a five-part instructional video series (privately provided to me) devoted to tantric techniques and practices. Unlike in *Darshan Tantra*, however, these practices are presented in the videos within a broader conceptual framework rather than as isolated techniques. The explanations of Tantric methods are intertwined with Rudnev's broader ideas about human conditioning, social programs, external influences, and the role of state structures.

The presentation of Tantra follows a gradual progression, comparable to the structure found in the written teachings. Sexual practices are introduced only after preliminary stages that include self-development, control over the body, mind, and emotions, cultivation of awareness, and work with sexual energy. The videos present Tantra as a system in which sexual practices constitute just one element of a broader process of transformation rather than an independent activity. The culmination of this progression is the description of *Maithuna* as an advanced tantric practice that requires prior preparation. Before *Maithuna*, the teachings emphasize a gradual process of preparation involving meditation, contemplation of the ideal, yogic asanas, pranayama, tantric dance, and practices aimed at developing control over the body, mind, emotions, and sexual energy.

The fourth part offers the most detailed practical description, presenting the "Maithuna Sexual Kata" as a sequence of twelve positions ("bonds": Hawk Bond, Swan Bond, Rooster Bond, Snake Bond, Angus Bond, Fish Bond, Deer Bond, Horse Bond, Boar Bond, Wolf Bond, Tiger Bond, and Dragon Bond). Each position is described not merely as a bodily arrangement but as a stage of energetic work involving concentration, breath control, movement of energy through the body's channels, activation of chakras, and the awakening of Kundalini. The practice is presented as requiring conscious control over sexual energy rather than its ordinary release through orgasm. Instead, sexual energy is redirected through the body and transformed into higher states of consciousness. The final stages of the "Kata" are framed as the formation of a shared energetic field between partners, culminating in cosmic union, expanded consciousness, and transcendence of ordinary physical limitations.

The Keeper of the Knowledge and Other Masters

What also connects most of the volumes is their graphic design, which features an image of the Sage on the cover, a reference to Rudnev. Of particular interest is his attire: a black robe with wide sleeves and a high-standing collar, a head covering resembling a klobuk, and the symbol of Nicholas Roerich's (1874–1947) "Banner of Peace" on his chest. Although this symbol is associated with the Roerich Pact (finalized in 1935 as the "Treaty on the Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Historic Monuments"), it is also embedded in the broader ideas Roerich promoted. It is strongly associated with esotericism, particularly Theosophy.

In addition to other direct references, especially to George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866–1949), Roerich holds a distinct place in Rudnev's framework, not only as an artist but also as a seeker who approached knowledge through effort, discipline, and direct experience. This contrasts with contemporary spiritual information, which is widely available yet often lacks proper understanding and practical application (Darshan[s] n.d., V, 80, IX, 682–84). The author frequently cites other figures, quotes passages from their teachings, and offers his own interpretations of these ideas. He also explicitly names several individuals as Great Masters: Gurdjieff, Osho Rajneesh (1931–1990), and Carlos Castaneda (1925–1998) (Darshan[s] n.d., IV, 370).

The Cosmic Laws and the Influence of Planets

Beyond the social conditions and external forms of human conditioning discussed above, the individual is presented as subject to additional influences beyond the family, the state, and social institutions: namely, planetary forces, which, in this system, take on a constraining character. Astrology thus constitutes an important esoteric component of the movement, functioning not as a tool for personality description or prediction but as part of a broader cosmological model that explains the forces shaping human existence.

According to the Darshans, planets are living forces governed by different levels of cosmic laws, and human beings remain under their influence until they develop awareness and can distance themselves from identification with thoughts, emotions, and external conditions. As the Sage explains, "until we achieve

awareness, planets will continue to act on us according to our cosmogram, which was formed at birth” (Darshan[s] n.d., III, 305).

The hierarchy of influences corresponds to different cosmic levels: ordinary existence is governed by lower laws associated with social roles, false personalities, and repetitive patterns. Further development involves a transition toward stronger influences, including the laws of the planets, the Sun, the Galaxy, and ultimately higher cosmic orders (Darshan[s] n.d., III, 304–16). The author argues that followers of different groups are subject to different laws and levels of influence (Darshan[s] n.d., III, 307), suggesting that these factors also condition spiritual practice.

Egregors: Between Spiritual Realms and Everyday Life

One of the key concepts rooted in esotericism and appearing throughout Rudnev’s teachings is the Egregor, discussed in all Darshan volumes except Volumes 1 and 11 (e.g., Darshan[s] n.d., II, 344; III, 57–60, 307, 383–84; IV, 406–37; VIII, 336–392) as well as in *Darshan Tantra* (Rudnev n.d.b, 91, 134, 139) and in *Life in the Egregore* (n.d.).

The Egregor is described as a collective energetic field that forms around a central idea and is sustained by the emotions, beliefs, and actions of those connected to it. Different religious traditions, social structures, and forms of collective identity are presented as expressions of Egregoric influence.

The teachings distinguish between lower Egregors, which reinforce limiting patterns and restrict development, and higher Egregors, which provide access to knowledge and support spiritual transformation (Darshan[s] n.d., IV, 406–37; VIII, 336–92). Because individuals cannot exist outside such influences, spiritual development requires recognizing the Egregors shaping one’s life and consciously relating to them. In this way, categories derived from esoteric discourse are extended into everyday experience, where ordinary relationships, social roles, and personal choices become part of broader spiritual dynamics.

A Misunderstanding: "The Way of the Fool"

The scope of the sources is, I believe, already evident. I have discussed only a few esoteric topics within the large corpus of Rudnev's teachings. Yet, in the opponents' narrative, there is only one resource that is repeatedly mentioned: *The Way of the Fool* (Путь дурака), published in two volumes (Petukhova and others n.d.). The main problem with this source is that its authorship is misattributed. Rudnev did not write it. This happens frequently in esoteric movements and would not be a problem if the text were not used against Rudnev in court cases. *The Way of the Fool* is wrongly presented as "the main scripture" of "Ashram Shambhala." Although it circulated among students, together with a myriad of other texts, it never had a special status nor is it a systematic presentation of Rudnev's teachings.

The first part is a fictionalized narrative about Rudnev's life, in which he is portrayed as "Kot." This character becomes interested in spirituality at an early age and receives spiritual instruction, pursuing self-development as he grows up. This is a spiritually inspired narrative about the teacher, written by his student, Polina Petukhova (Tamara Rudneva, personal communication). The second part consists of texts written by other students.

Some of the texts revisit themes that also appear in the Darshans, yet they do so in a significantly different form and tone. In contrast, Rudnev's writings maintain a highly consistent structure and style throughout more than a thousand pages. The texts in *The Way of the Fool* also lack clear theoretical coherence and fail to present the more nuanced esoteric themes explored elsewhere. The book was never intended as a guide for the students, certainly not for the advanced ones.

Although maliciously exploited by opponents and prosecutors, the misunderstandings about *The Way of the Fool* are interesting in themselves. It can be argued that not only are the writings associated with Konstantin Rudnev saturated with esoteric motifs, but their reception and interpretation also reveal intriguing esoteric dimensions: limited access to source materials, narratives of concealment and prohibition, and instances of misattributed authorship.

Conclusion

The analysis of certain practices taught by Rudnev shows that they cannot be understood as isolated techniques detached from the broader system of ideas in which they are embedded. Meditation, astrology, and tantric practices are presented within a comprehensive framework that includes specific understandings of knowledge, human development, and the forces shaping individual existence. The notion that knowledge is not equally accessible to everyone, the central role of the Teacher, and the distinction between higher and lower forms of influence provide the basis for interpreting these practices as instruments of transformation rather than merely as exercises or rituals.

At the same time, the practical dimension demonstrates how broader elements of Rudnev's worldview become integrated into both spiritual practices and everyday life. Concepts such as planetary influences, Egregors, Dark Powers, and the distinction between higher and lower forms of knowledge provide interpretive frameworks through which personal development, social relations, and ordinary experiences are understood. In this sense, practices function not only as methods of transformation but also as ways of perceiving and organizing reality in accordance with Rudnev's cosmology.

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The “Tutors”: Interviews with Konstantin Rudnev’s Advanced Students

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the experiences of five advanced students of Konstantin Rudnev—known as “tutors”—whose testimonies illuminate both the internal dynamics of his school and the consequences of the 2010 police raid that dismantled the Siberian community. Based on Zoom interviews conducted in June 2026, the study reconstructs the tutors’ backgrounds in late-Soviet irreligious households, their attraction to emerging spiritual practices during Perestroika, and their progressive involvement in Rudnev’s eclectic system of yoga, meditation, shamanism, and esoteric philosophy. Their accounts describe the ashram’s demanding contemplative regime, Rudnev’s charismatic presence, and the pedagogical methods by which he trained itinerant instructors. After the raid and Rudnev’s imprisonment, the tutors dispersed across Europe and Latin America, continuing to transmit his teachings informally while avoiding public association due to ongoing investigations and pervasive stigma. Their narratives reveal how a once-centralized spiritual community fragmented into individualized forms of transmission that Rudnev neither managed nor controlled, shaped by repression, exile, and the persistence of devotion to a teacher they regard as unjustly persecuted.

KEYWORDS: Konstantin Rudnev, Ashram Shambhala, Yoga in Russia, Esotericism in Russia, Anti-Cult Movements in Russia, Tantra.

Introduction

This article examines the experiences and careers of Konstantin Rudnev’s students before and after the 2010 raid on “Ashram Shambhala”—the name his students gave to Rudnev’s community in Siberia.

The process of learning about this NRM presents unique challenges for this researcher. First, it is a Russian spiritual movement that developed in the Soviet Union during a period when religious literature, including the Bible, was banned, and religious teachers and groups were regarded with intolerance and suspicion and persecuted. Thus, the political and social background of this movement was quite different from NRMs in the West.

The second challenge for researchers trying to gather information about this NRM is posed by the Russian government’s draconian efforts to suppress and

eradicate “Ashram Shambhala” in Russia and abroad. Thus, after the 2010 arrest of the leader and the physical assault on the ashram, which since its founding in 1989 had become a thriving spiritual teaching center and communal society in Siberia, Rudnev’s trained instructors (known as “tutors” or “mentors”) fled abroad where they continued to disseminate his teachings, holding workshops or seminars, or infusing Rudnev’s ideas and worldview into their daily interactions with students or customers.

The research method for this chapter has therefore mainly consisted of conducting interviews with four “tutors” (students trained by Rudnev to become itinerant missionaries in Russia in the early 2000s) and the student who became Rudnev’s wife. These interviews were conducted via Zoom in June 2026, with interpreters for those who spoke Russian.

The population of “Ashram Shambhala” was fluid. Approximately 15 people were living there right before the raid. There were no smaller “ashrams” in Russian cities or in Europe. The only ashram was Ashram Shambhala, located near Novosibirsk. In other cities, there were local yoga and study groups where yoga, meditation, pranayama and Rudnev’s ideas were taught. Students occasionally attended seminars conducted by instructors (the “tutors”) who had trained directly with Konstantin Rudnev, then known as “Shri Dzrihan Avatar Muni.”

According to my contacts, approximately 20,000 people participated in these groups and seminars held in Russia. Before the 2010 police raid, the total number of followers and participants in Europe and worldwide exceeded 100,000.

Rudnev’s Students: The Interviews

I interviewed five of Konstantin Rudnev’s students over Zoom in June 2026. While a larger sample would have been preferable, these interviews did yield valuable information about the social context, the appeal of the Master’s teachings, his charismatic presence, didactic methods, and the vibrant, thriving community at Ashram Shambhala. My five informants were born between 1975 and 1983 in the Soviet Union. They are all in their forties or fifties and are currently living in or traveling between Montenegro, Belgium, Germany, Argentina, Brazil, and other Latin American countries.

They grew up in irreligious households where atheism prevailed, and spirituality was taboo. They described their families as kind, supportive, and stable, with parents who encouraged them to pursue a science-based education at university. One became a psychological counselor. Another studied mechanics and technology, specializing in wood processing. Another became an engineer. They described how, as teenagers, they became aware of alternative worldviews involving spiritual ideas and practices and were fascinated by scientific accounts of the paranormal and psychic phenomena available in the Soviet Union at the time. Perestroika ushered in opportunities to explore the exotic spirituality practices found in shamanism, martial arts, and yoga (Introvigne and Vardé 2026a, 2026b).

My informants began their separate spiritual quests in their twenties by joining a yoga class that turned out to be more than just hatha yoga. Taught by Rudnev's trained instructors or "tutors," these yoga classes included meditation, breathing exercises and lectures on esoteric philosophy. Their instructors recommended intensive seminars in which students were introduced to a range of spiritual ideas and practices, from Hindu Vedanta and Buddhism to Astrology and Shamanism. Eventually, the students would be invited to meet the "Teacher," Shri Dzhnan Avatar Muni, at the Ashram Shambhala near Novosibirsk.

- Informant "D."

D. was born in 1980 in Brezhnev City (present-day Naberezhnye Chelny) and earned an engineering degree at university. He worked as an engineer until his vocation to spread Rudnev's teachings became his priority. He enjoyed a happy childhood devoid of religious influences, except for an aunt who visited once a year and told him about auras, chakras, and superpowers. In his teens, he was a hardworking student with very little social life:

I was very shy, no girlfriends. Education makes you shy. I was 18 and realized my plans for the future were very difficult to pursue. I was very young, ambitious, but making slow progress. I was very sad. My mother saw that I was upset and suggested yoga. In those days, very few people did yoga; they saw it as strange. My mother's friend was a yoga teacher, and when I visited the class, I found that I was weak and needed to practice a lot. Then someone recommended a seminar I attended and really liked.

At age 18, D. met his first "mentor" [tutor], a 50-year-old man named Arjuna, who came to town periodically to give seminars. D. attended these for five years.

We would do yoga, massage, chakra work, dance, and breathing exercises [pranayama]. I began to feel free and relaxed. Arjuna described the spiritual word and spoke about shamanism, bodily movement, and body work.

At around age 22, D. met Konstantin Rudnev. “We called him Shri Dzhnan Avatar Muni. I decided to go to Ashram [Shambhala] because I wanted to open up my superpowers.” D. described the training program at the Ashram:

At first, it was like my other seminars, but we had daily practice, we lived together, and worked a lot on body training. I asked him questions about many topics, like Astrology. His answers were not given to me personally, but to everybody in the group. His knowledge was very deep; it transformed my life. I realized I wanted to learn this deep knowledge and use it in my life. I really began to understand the greatness of the teacher. I stayed at the Ashram [Shambhala] for six months, then left, and afterward would visit every month or two, for several days. I started to train as a teacher, a Tutor. I worked a little at the University as an Engineer, but then I preferred to develop myself, so I left my job. I lived in different towns and gave seminars. Then I went back to the Ashram to cleanse myself of negative energy. Then I went to different towns as a traveling preacher. In those days, I had no social activities. People gave me charity at the seminars, and it was enough. I didn’t want to go the social way. I had my 22nd birthday with my family, and my 23rd at the Ashram. I served as the assistant to the Teacher for one year. When I traveled outside the Ashram, I was alone, but in the second year, I was given an assistant.

- Informant “M.”

M. was born in 1971 into a military family that lived in the far north of Russia, where there was no sun for 4 months of the year. He notes, “We had no TV; instead, we had the North Sea and the Aurora Borealis.” M. notes that “growing up in North Russia and Ukraine, I had heard stories about shamans and spirits.” From ages 17 to 20, M. lived near Lake Baikal with a neo-pagan community that studied martial arts. When he was 21, M. returned to the city where he and his fellow students became involved in criminal activities:

In the 1990s, my school friends started making a lot of money, and I ended up in a lawless environment. I was not interested in alcohol or drugs, but I liked the money. Then, after two years, I stopped. I realized something was wrong. My body started to suffer. I began to lose weight. Before then, I would always train my body. The lifestyle stopped being interesting. I realized a part of me was dying.

M. began to seek out spiritual people again. He was given a book on spiritual healing that featured a photo of Rudnev. He read Rudnev’s books for two years before he received an invitation to meet him in 1997. He visited the ashram for a short time, then returned to Ukraine to complete unfinished business, and in 1998, he joined the Ashram in Siberia.

I had 12 years of pure happiness. I did not marry or have children; my role was to be just a student. I realized I had a talent for explaining something, so I made it my goal to pass along the Knowledge. I was a regular student at first, doing yoga, meditation, and martial arts. The older students had administrative responsibilities. The Teacher prepared

me to be a tutor. I started to guide others in his name. For several weeks, I would travel, share his knowledge, and then spend several weeks at the ashram learning. He teaches us that the ashram is inside you, in your heart.

- Informant "G."

G. was born in 1975 and grew up in the Soviet Union with its "very strong ban on spirituality, although my grandmother secretly baptized me into her faith." Her father was a mechanic, and she studied wood processing at the local university. She never married or had children. When she was 14, her mother took her to a newly built church with a kind priest who was "not classic" and who baptized her. She explains, "This was during the open period of Perestroika when cultural leaders and scientists were coming to our country." When she was 20 and attending university in Bratsk, she was introduced to yoga by the mother of her friend:

I was the youngest in a class of middle-aged people, but I was shocked at how energetic and flexible they were compared to me! I was struggling to remember the mantras as we chanted, but by the end of the class I felt, "I'm home!" I felt such inspiration and support.

After one year of yoga, G. traveled to Ashram Shambhala in 2000. People were living in different "flats" (apartments), but the number fluctuated between 5 and 30 as people came and left to spend time with Shri Dzhnan Avatar Muni.

G. described arriving with "no preconceptions" but soon felt "everything is great!" "People were building spiritual relationships living with each other and having the clear feeling 'I am here forever'." As a "sportswoman," G. enjoyed the demanding physical discipline of the ashram, waking up at 1 a.m. to go swimming, running in summer or winter temperatures. During her 14-year residency, she studied Carlos Castaneda's (1925–1998) books and participated in the Toltec shamanic practice of "conscious dreaming" (Castaneda 1993).

- Informant "S."

S. was born in 1982. Her father was a "military man." She studied clinical psychology at an institute in Moscow and began working as a Psychological and Family Consultant there. She participated in a yoga group for five years, led by a couple who were students of Rudnev and trained in his ashram. As she explained, the Hatha Yoga class also offered discussions of "broad topics" and a 10-week healing course. S. claimed she was 70% deaf in one ear when she started yoga, but recovered 100% of her hearing by attending sessions on Tibetan healing methods.

After a short six-month visit to the Ashram Shambhala, S. returned to life in Moscow. She began living with a man and sharing his lifestyle, which involved smoking, alcohol, and the use of hard drugs. She soon contracted Hepatitis C. She notes:

You copy and acquire the lifestyle of those you live with. I received Hepatitis C this way. I stopped this toxic relationship. I realized I need to choose my atmosphere. So, I joined the Ashram permanently, from 2002 to 2010.

After drinking healing herbs for three months, she was cured of Hepatitis C. She had a test to verify this. Her role was to organize the food supply for the Ashram, so she would place orders and supervise meals.

She loved the daily schedule at the ashram:

We awoke at 1 a.m. to go swimming in the lake, then ran back home or jogged on the beach. In our sleep, we were more filled with energy to practice conscious dreaming. In the morning, we did physical exercises to raise our energy. In the evening, we did yoga to calm down and held a communal prayer in Russian. All our readings and mantras were in Russian.

The Celibate Lifestyle

It is interesting to note that none of the four tutors married or had children. Many of the students who came to the ashram brought their families. While the tutors noted, “Teacher never said we should get married; he never told us how it was supposed to be. If people are in love, he says yes, create a family,” it appears that the spartan, precarious lifestyle of an itinerant preacher demanded celibacy and detachment from intimate relationships. D. explained his choice as a “sacrifice to a higher purpose.” He recalls Rudnev’s discussion of “the Tantra topic and ideas about the transformation of sexual energy to live a long life.” He notes, “I used this energy to help people. I fasted and slept very little and transformed my sexual energy so I could help people.”

The fifth informant, T., proved to be an exception to this pattern because she became Konstantin Rudnev’s wife.

- Informant T.

T. was brought up with a scientific education with no religious background and had no interest in spirituality. She was, however, keenly interested in philosophy

and psychology. In 2007, she heard about the Teacher in a seminar she attended. One of Rudnev's students was speaking, and T. was impressed:

He answered questions that I had never asked before—about love and emotional states. I never thought it was possible to control one's emotional state before. So much knowledge! I heard about Master Konstantin and his books. I wanted to meet him. So in 2008, I went to the Ashram in Siberia.

When she arrived, Rudnev was already speaking; she was late for his lecture:

As I entered the room, he had already started with 60 people around him. He was sitting in the middle of a stage. When I came in, I saw that he was shining. He was so magnetic that I just stopped; I didn't look for a seat. He was so inspiring, talking about psychological development and how you can search inside yourself. I stopped to catch my breath, then I came closer. He looked at me. I could see the Universe in the eyes of a Master! Behind his eyes, all my questions disappeared. I thought, "I want to always be in this state, to always be with him!" I was lost... In Russia, we have this phrase: "The most attractive sexual organ in a man is the brain."

She described the daily walks in the forest:

I started to run in the forest with the other students until we were hot and sweaty. Then we would jump into icy water or roll naked in the snow. The teacher said it would strengthen your immune system. I found a place in the village with horses, so I asked him if I could go riding. Every day, I would take a horse and go riding in the forest. I loved it! He would give lectures in the middle of the day with a close group of students. He would walk in the forest for six hours with ten to fifteen students he was training. I received an invitation to walk with him. I try to be near and ask questions. We record what he says. I started to help him. He doesn't do email, but I do, so I could help answer thousands of questions from people all over the world.

T. spoke of their love relationship:

Once, we were walking, and he was talking to someone else, and I almost fell! He reached out his hand and stopped me. I looked into his eyes, and we grew closer. We held hands as we walked and started talking one-on-one. I was interested in the ideas that he transmitted. He saw that. He gives all of himself. Sometimes we were alone, and we grew closer. In May 2009, we went to Kyiv in Ukraine. He liked to go to the seaside near Ukraine. We were so close at that moment, and he asked me if I wanted to be officially married (even though we were already together forever, not just in this life). So we were married in a government registration building, and later we married again in a shamanic ceremony with a few close students and the four gods of eternity, the past, present, and future.

She explained her role in the Ashram:

I became Konstantin's right-hand woman. He can answer any question, but he doesn't like technology. He loves nature, but he doesn't have a phone. I have a phone and am always in contact with people, so I became his communicator to the whole world. He is not fluent in any language but Russian. I speak English, so I answer questions sent to him in English.

T. was unique among Rudnev’s students. She never became a traveling tutor because she married him legally. She was thereby able to maintain access (albeit strictly limited) to Rudnev during his prison sentences in Russia and Argentina, and to support him during his period of release. She accompanied him to Argentina and stood by him as the Bariloche prosecutors targeted him, and she cared for him during his house arrest.

Answers from Rudnev

I asked T. if I could interview Konstantin Rudnev. She told me he was recovering from surgery and did not speak English. In the end, I sent a list of questions, which T. relayed to him. She facilitated a long, fascinating discussion with her husband based on my questions. By this means, I was able to gain insights into Rudnev’s formation as a philosopher and mystic from childhood into early manhood: who his spiritual teachers were and what books influenced his thought. More importantly, I gained insights into what an extraordinary effort this man had made to seek out hitherto inaccessible sources of occult knowledge that were banned in the Soviet Union, and his remarkable talent in synthesizing radically different and apparently incompatible worldviews in such a way as to present a series of strikingly new ideas and a coherent system of forgotten knowledge to his students.

Rudnev’s interest in Christianity was frustrated because the Bible was banned in Russia. Still, while reading atheistic literature, he discovered a treasure trove of Bible verses, mocked and denounced by atheist authors. He cut them out and compiled them as an incomplete Bible.

As for Shamanism, Rudnev notes:

...fortunately, there were scientific works available.... When the Russian tsars were conquering Siberia, scholars also went there—ethnographers, so to speak... Thanks to these scientists, information about shamanism has been preserved. Of course, it was fragmentary and incomplete, more theoretical, but still some information survived.

To access the books by George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866–1949), Castaneda, Osho Rajneesh (1931–1990), and others, Rudnev relied on “samizdat,” the self-published underground literature available in the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Rudnev explained the process as follows:

Books were retyped on typewriters back then... They used tracing paper—the thinnest paper. A carbon copy system was used up to the 12th copy, at which point the text

was barely visible... It was all blurred and hard to see. But it allowed people to produce 12 copies at once, rather than just one book. I read 12th-copy texts with a magnifying glass, trying to make out the letters. Sometimes I had to trace the letters by hand because they were not clearly visible. I had to read with a magnifying glass, and sometimes I had to reconstruct the meaning intuitively... I read these books: Osho, Gurdjieff, Castaneda, and others—through samizdat copies.

Rudnev's explorations into trance states accessed through "archaic techniques of ecstasy" (Eliade 1964) such as dance or chanting began in childhood. He notes:

Since childhood, I have always had a desire to experience everything directly. I was not very interested in book knowledge. I always wanted to experience, to touch, to feel anything I learned about. And only when I experienced it emotionally, in my whole being, did I feel satisfaction—that yes, now I know what it is.

As a child, the forest was his home. At age 20, he reports, he traveled to Altai to study with a Siberian shaman named Altai Kam for several years. He experimented with drugs in his childhood to experience their effect and decided they interfered with one's self-will.

Rudnev recalls how, as a child, he searched for Christian hymns on his grandfather's old receiver and danced to them. Later, he discovered recordings of the hymns of a Russian Orthodox hermit monk, called "Monk Roman," whom he considers to be a saint:

In the 1980s, I was trying to understand Christianity, but I had to understand it on my own. That is, I would take religious hymns and begin to dance to them. And I would enter into these religious states—deep religious states of faith, love, and perception of God.

The Charisma of Konstantin Rudnev

The interviews offered vivid descriptions of Rudnev's extraordinary presence and his excellence as a speaker. My informants offered vivid descriptions of his exotic costumes, his kindness, and his sensitivity towards his audience. M. reported:

In the evening, we would gather. He would sit in an armchair like Osho. The room was dim with candles, which helped to open the third eye. He wore a shaman's headband. He was quite young and strong and had an extraordinary voice, resonant but very calm. When he spoke, I felt I was breathing in the energy he gave. I could see the teacher's aura filling the whole room. I felt his aura was infinite kindness and love. He answered all our questions, even when they were naive or the same people kept asking the same ones. He was always ready to help. He was never critical; he supported everybody. When I first saw Teacher,

he was wearing a black shamanic outfit embroidered with gold thread. He wore the red symbol on his cloak and a shaman’s headband. I ended up with hundreds of people living together, feeling as if Teacher were giving his love, sent straight from his heart to all of them.

Several commented on his mysterious quality. S. described him as a “Teacher whose wisdom was so deep it was impossible to identify his age. He was ageless. Now I think he must have been around 30.” They were impressed by Rudnev’s special knowledge of the nature of the spiritual world:

The teacher was in contact on the subtle planes with the Masters of Shambhala. He would share with us his Samadhi experiences and his conversation with God on how the Universe was constructed.

Rudnev’s account (via T.) of his mystical quest since childhood gives us new insights into his appeal and impact in Russia. Here was a man who went to extraordinary lengths to access wisdom that was suppressed and banned in his time. As a child, he prowled the forest, ingested drugs, hunted down and danced to Christian hymns. As a youth, he scoured atheist books for biblical passages, and perused samizdat 12th-copy texts through a magnifying glass. He not only gathered this eclectic mine of information but also synthesized it into a coherent worldview to support his childhood intuition that all religions worship the same God.

The Tutors: Their Mission Today

The tutors each expressed their deep shock at being separated from their Teacher after the 2010 raid, their sense of loss, and their common resolve to continue spreading their Master’s teachings. M. reported:

After 2010, I never saw him again. He was in prison for 11 years. After I left the country, I have been giving seminars in Belgium on his teachings. There are no more ashrams, but as a Tutor I transmit the knowledge. There are so many lies put on the name of the teacher in the media. My mission is to bring this truth to people and tell them about the Perfect Teacher so they can still receive help from him. It hurts because what I loved was taken away. I realized it was impossible to stay in Russia. When you see such beauty, such love destroyed... You can no longer trust. I had friends abroad, so I left right away. When I left Russia, I took my notebooks with me, and I realized it was very dangerous. I go to Europe, to Germany, then to Latin America, where I stay in a few countries, Chile and Brazil. I help people; I teach them the knowledge, and they give me money, donations—not a lot. I don’t need much. I try to share the love and the knowledge, and to teach as my Teacher taught me. Some people help me. They always appear in magical ways.

He taught me to trust the Universe. If you live like that, with trust and joy – people will appear. I am very grateful. But it pains me that such a great person was not understood in Russia. It is very sad!.

S. told a similar story:

After 2010, no one coordinated anything; everyone made their own decisions. It was dangerous; we were at risk. Even now, the investigation continues, and the police are searching for more victims. For his students, this is a very risky period. There are no victims. The victims named in the legal case in Russia were paid or forced. Nobody goes into details because there are no details. Ashram Shambhala no longer exists. A few years after the raid, the organization was officially banned.

D.'s experience was partially different:

When the raid happened in 2010, I was not there. I was far away in Europe or Brazil. I was aware of all the criticism and opposition for around a year. They were all lies. I heard the news of the raid secondhand, from others. I was so busy. I wanted to look online. I overheard discussions. I had to close my social media. I received threats; it was so negative.

However, all shared a sense of shock and helplessness. As reported by S.,

After the raid, I didn't know what to do. I was shocked. I didn't see any other way but to keep helping people. I was in Brazil for three years, then I came back to Russia. I saw many students there. Then I traveled to other places, and my life went on as before. I was invited to different seminars. Today, everyone is on their own, helping people. We are in contact with our colleagues and ask for advice on how to handle our clients' problems. I follow my own path. I left Russia. All the people who wished to continue to convey his ideas moved abroad. I live in Montenegro. I am alone, but I support my family and friends in Russia. I help people through a psychological counseling practice. I don't speak his name. But I share his knowledge. I wish him a long and happy life as much as is possible.

Conclusion

The ferocity of the Russian government's suppression of this spiritual movement is reflected in the "tutors'" operations today, which remain tentative and secretive. Rudnev's well-trained former students, or "tutors," continue to communicate what they call the "knowledge" or "wisdom" of their "Teacher," each in their own way. They may do this through workplace contacts, through psychological counseling with clients, or by organizing seminars and serving as invited speakers. These Russian conveyors of spiritual knowledge are working abroad, in Montenegro, Brazil, Germany, Belgium, and many other countries.

According to my informants, there is no organized, centralized, or coherent “Ashram Shambhala” movement today. During Rudnev’s eleven years in a Russian prison, his communications were carefully monitored. He was allowed one brief, closely monitored phone call with his wife every two months. In Montenegro, he was kept under surveillance. After the arrest in Argentina, the situation was similar. Thus, since 2010, Rudnev has neither the will nor the opportunity to direct a “movement.” Some tutors have continued to teach without any supervision from Rudnev.

Today, the tutors fall into three classes. Some plagiarize his ideas to build their own career, giving him no credit. Some appropriate the name “Ashram Shambhala” and falsely claim to be his appointed successors. Finally, the tutors featured in this chapter continue to disseminate Rudnev’s teachings. Since the police investigation is still active today, these tutors do not dare mention their spiritual master’s name or refer to his books. Nevertheless, they continue to dedicate their lives to “helping people” by sharing the knowledge and wisdom of their anonymous spiritual master with the public.

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**The Russian Anti-Cult Movement,
Alexander Dvorkin, and Konstantin Rudnev**

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the role of Russian anti-cult activism—particularly Alexander Dvorkin and the Russian Orthodox Church—in the decades-long campaign against Konstantin Rudnev and the movement known as “Ashram Shambhala.” Drawing on court rulings, media interventions, and the evolution of post-Soviet religious policy, the study reconstructs how anti-cult rhetoric, state security concerns, and Orthodox institutional interests converged to create a hostile environment for minority spiritual groups. The 2014 ban on “Ashram Shambhala,” grounded in discredited notions of “brainwashing” and supported by earlier fabricated criminal proceedings, exemplifies the symbiosis between anti-cult actors and state authorities. The article situates Dvorkin’s influence within broader developments: the post-1990 expansion of religious diversity, the emergence of “spiritual security” as a national priority, the tightening of registration and extremism laws, and the growing alignment between Orthodox identity and state policy. The Rudnev case illustrates how anti-cult discourse became a tool for suppressing non-traditional religious movements, legitimizing censorship, and exporting Russian narratives abroad. It also highlights the evidentiary weaknesses and political motivations underlying the persecution of alternative spiritual communities in contemporary Russia.

KEYWORDS: Konstantin Rudnev, Ashram Shambhala, Alexander Dvorkin, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Russian Orthodox Church.

“Ashram Shambhala” Banned in Russia

On 11 April 2014, the Novosibirsk Regional Court in Russia banned the religious movement “Ashram Shambhala,” founded by Konstantin Rudnev in Novosibirsk in 1989 (Duval, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). The decision entered into force on 20 May 2014. The verdict incorrectly stated that Rudnev “gave the religious group the name ‘Ashram Shambhala.’” In fact, some of his students first used the name, and the media later popularized it; it is widely used to designate the community of his followers, but Rudnev never founded or incorporated an organization called “Ashram Shambhala.”

The decision claimed that “Ashram Shambhala” was “a pseudo-Tantric neo-pagan totalitarian and destructive cult, whose activities are associated with violence and incitement of citizens to refuse to fulfill civil duties.” How a Russian court can distinguish between “genuine” and “pseudo” Tantric teachings was not explained.

Based on a report by anti-cult “experts,” the court noted that Rudnev’s teachings incorporated “occult ideas of the Roerichs [Nicholas, 1874–1947, and Helena, 1879–1955], H.[elena] P.[etrovna] Blavatsky [1831–1891], C.[arlos] Castaneda [1925–1998], Sri Aurobindo [1872–1950], Osho [Rajneesh, 1931–1990], G.[eorge] I.[vanovich] Gurdjieff [1866–1949], and P.[yotr] D.[emyanovich] Ouspensky [1878–1947],” which the court seemed to consider somewhat objectionable. The judges also insisted that Rudnev’s allegedly “anti-social” teachings were included in the book *The Way of the Fool* (Petukhova and others n.d.). They dismissed the objection that the text was not a doctrinal statement but a fictional account of his early life written by a disciple rather than by him, supplemented by texts by other students.

The decision largely relied on the theory that “cults” use “brainwashing,” discredited among Western scholars of new religious movements (Introvigine 2022) but still used by courts in Russia. Discussing the “victims” of “Ashram Shambhala,” the court stated that

to suppress their will and subordinate them to the desires and will of K. D. Rudnev, psychic and psychological violence was exerted on them in the form of specially developed methods of aggressive external influence on the psyche, which were actively applied to the involved persons... The application of these methods resulted in the formation of a stable psychological dependence of the persons involved on K. D. Rudnev and the environment of the religious group “Ashram Shambhala,” fear of social connections and relations outside it, as well as control over the actions and will of the “adepts” and “sadhakas,” their subordination to his [Rudnev’s] will and desires, and long-term retention of them in the religious group “Ashram Shambhala.”

The Court was aware of the European Court of Human Rights’ (ECHR) 2010 decision in *Jehovah’s Witnesses of Moscow and Others v. Russia*, in which the measures taken against the Jehovah’s Witnesses were found incompatible with freedom of religion or belief (European Court of Human Rights 2010). However, it distinguished the Rudnev case as one in which beliefs were imposed on the members through “coercion against their will.” In fact, the Jehovah’s Witnesses had also been accused of using “mind control.” The ECHR had

objected that “there is no generally accepted and scientific definition of what constitutes ‘mind control’” (European Court of Human Rights 2010, 129),

The Court also stated that in the Rudnev case, the decision to ban “Ashram Shambhala” was based on a prior criminal verdict. One year earlier, in February 2013, Rudnev had been sentenced to 11 years’ imprisonment in a strict-regime penal colony, following a sham trial based on fabricated charges and marred by procedural irregularities, witness contamination, and narrative construction (Duval, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

The persecution had started even earlier. In Novosibirsk, police tried to suppress the early movement’s activities. Attempts to prosecute Rudnev were initiated in 1999, 2004, and 2008, but on each occasion, investigators ultimately failed to establish any criminal conduct or identify victims.

In 2004, criminal proceedings were initiated under Article 239 of the Russian Criminal Code (“Creation of, and leadership in, an association infringing upon the personality and rights of citizens”), a provision frequently invoked against groups labeled as “cults” (“секты” in Russian). The proceedings were eventually discontinued because investigators found insufficient evidence that any crime had been committed.

In October 2008, police and special forces conducted a raid in the village of Plotnikovo in the Novosibirsk Region, where Rudnev lived, detaining him and six members of the movement who were then listed on the federal wanted register.

Following the raid, the Main Directorate of Internal Affairs publicly compared Ashram Shambhala to the Japanese movement Aum Shinrikyo, which in 1995 had carried out a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, killing 14 people and injuring thousands (*Interfax Religion* 2008). This comparison was intended to make a striking impression and to warn against Rudnev. It was absolutely inappropriate, as Ashram Shambhala, unlike Aum Shinrikyo, had never been associated with acts of terrorism.

Who Was Behind the Persecution?

Although Rudnev was a political as well as a spiritual dissident and openly criticized the regime, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was the primary instigator of the persecution. While other figures have also emerged, the

main anti-cult activist employed by the ROC in Russia is Alexander Leonidovich Dvorkin. He also played a key role in the Rudnev case.

The ROC and Dvorkin expressed growing concern about the expansion of “Ashram Shambhala.” They estimated that the movement had approximately 20,000 followers by the beginning of the twenty-first century and increasingly portrayed it as one of the country’s most significant “cult” organizations.

Dvorkin often covered Rudnev and “Ashram Shambhala” on his website iriney.ru. As early as 2003, the site published an article by Dvorkin’s second-in-command in the Russian anti-cult umbrella organization RATsIRS, Archpriest Alexander Novopashin, describing “Ashram Shambhala” as “a monstrous cult practicing bullying, child molestation, sexual violence, perversion, and extortion” (Novopashin 2003).

In 2004, another article on Dvorkin’s website claimed that students did not realize they were “victims” because they were brainwashed and concluded: “Shutting down the cult is virtually impossible. We have the Law ‘On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations,’ which affirms everyone’s right to freedom of religion” (Zharikova 2004). Fortunately for Dvorkin’s followers, the political climate later changed.

That the ROC was behind the prosecution of Rudnev is also evidenced by the fact that, after his trial, the seized spiritual books and religious objects were destroyed by a court order of December 18, 2013, a measure the ROC had long advocated. The court ordered the destruction, in addition to books, of “53 compact discs containing audio and video files of the religious association” and even of “three ritual drums with beaters.”

Anti-Cultism in Post-Soviet Russia

After the Christianization of Kyivan Rus’ in 988 and the expansion of Christianity northward and eastward across Europe, Eastern Orthodoxy has been the dominant religious tradition in Russia.

In 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution brought enforced secularism and Communist indoctrination, followed by widespread persecution against all religions, including the Orthodox Church. This situation persisted for over 70 years.

During the years of glasnost and perestroika decreed by Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–2022), an important law was adopted. On 25 October 1990, the Duma (Lower House of the Federal Assembly of Russia) voted the “Law on Freedom of Conscience.” For the first time in Russian history, practicing religion was declared the unalienable right of all citizens.

One immediate result of the 1990 Law was an unprecedented and rapid expansion of religious diversity. Missionaries from Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Buddhist, Hindu, and other traditions poured into Russia in large numbers. Several new faiths of foreign origin quickly gained followers, but public concern also appeared about their rapid development and their financing. Suspicion arose, creating some fertile conditions for the emergence of anti-cult activism.

Rudnev and his school were among the beneficiaries of Russia’s openness to the world’s diversity after 1991, but also the victims of the ensuing wave of resistance, backlash, and rejection.

The growth of religious diversity started to be alarming to the ROC when it perceived it as an invasion, a threat to Russian identity, and finally an existential issue (Šorytė 2020).

In addition, along with the progressive comeback of the ROC in domestic politics, anti-cultism in Russia evolved from a relatively marginal concern into a significant religious, political, and security issue.

The Russian anti-cult movement first developed as a response of the Orthodox Church to the accelerated influx of foreign missionaries, new religious movements, and alternative spiritual groups filling the vacuum left by enforced state atheism.

The severe political and economic instability of the early 1990s also shaped the emergence of this movement. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought widespread social uncertainty, declining living standards, and the disappearance of many familiar institutions.

Over the following decades, Orthodox anti-cultism became closely linked with the interests of the Russian state, which increasingly adopted restrictive policies towards minority religions with their decision-making centers abroad (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012).

The first organized anti-cult initiatives appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Dvorkin had spent time in the United States before returning to Russia in the early 1990s.

During his stay in the United States, Dvorkin embraced Russian Orthodox Christianity and encountered the Western anti-cult movement, which relied heavily on concepts such as “brainwashing” and “mind control” to explain conversion to religious proselytizing groups.

When he returned to Russia in 1992, he adapted these ideas to the post-Soviet context, arguing that “totalitarian cults” threatened not only individual believers but also Russian society and national identity.

In 1993, he established the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Information-Consultation Center (SILIC) under the auspices of the ROC with the blessing of Patriarch Alexey II. The center became the most important anti-cult organization in Russia, maintaining extensive documentation on new religious movements and providing educational and advisory materials. He argued that certain religious groups used psychological manipulation, exploited members, and posed dangers to society (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012).

Unlike many Western anti-cult movements, which often developed independently of established churches, Russian anti-cultism became deeply intertwined with the ROC. Orthodox leaders viewed the influx of foreign religious groups as a threat to Russia’s spiritual and cultural identity. Anti-cult rhetoric frequently portrayed minority religions of foreign origin not merely as dangerous organizations but as agents of foreign influence undermining national traditions. This framing resonated with broader nationalistic sentiments that were gaining strength in post-Soviet Russia.

Amid the ensuing controversies, foreign proselytism became a hotly contested issue, with several Russian regions introducing local laws that favored their historical religions and restricted the missionary activities of newcomers. New religious movements became the main subject of these controversies and the chief target of the local laws.

In 1997, a major law was adopted: the “Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations.” It reflected the tensions mentioned above and placed serious restrictions on the registration of religious organizations and thus on the activities of religious groups of foreign origin. Religious communities registered

under the 1990 law were subject to the obligation of re-registration: many were denied the right to re-register and challenged the negative decision before domestic courts and then the ECHR, in particular the Salvation Army, the Jesuits, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Scientology.

The law was not explicitly targeting "cults," but it distinguished between "traditional" religions and newer religious organizations. Groups that could not demonstrate a long history of activity in Russia faced significant legal disadvantages. Orthodox leaders and anti-cult activists widely supported the legislation.

The law also introduced an extensive registration system requiring religious organizations to submit founding documents, identify their founders, and satisfy various administrative requirements. Although unregistered groups were not formally prohibited, they operated in an increasingly uncertain legal environment that became more restrictive as later anti-extremism legislation expanded state oversight. The law explicitly acknowledged the "special role" of Orthodoxy while recognizing Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as traditional religions, reinforcing a hierarchy that favored established faiths over newer religious movements.

The 1997 law, as well as the ideological stance and policies thereafter adopted by Russian authorities, was inspired by a desire to ensure Russia's "spiritual security." This new concept articulated the purported role of the Russian Orthodox Church in safeguarding national values and security. This brought to an end the brief period of religious freedom that Russia had experienced following the 1990 Law on Freedom of Conscience.

In 2000, the Putin Administration stated in its National Security Concept:

Assurance of the Russian Federation's national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life, and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia's peoples. There must be a state policy to maintain the population's spiritual and moral welfare, prohibit the use of airtime to promote violence or base instincts, and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012, 270).

This "spiritual security" concept became an important element of national security policy. Beginning with the 2000 National Security Concept, protection of Russia's spiritual and moral heritage was increasingly presented as a

state responsibility. Anti-cult activists found receptive audiences within state institutions, framing minority religions as threats not only to individual believers but also to patriotic values and social stability.

During the 2000s, anti-cult discourse became increasingly institutionalized. Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, the Russian state promoted a vision of national unity closely associated with Orthodox Christianity. Anti-cult organizations expanded their cooperation with government agencies, educational institutions, and law enforcement bodies. Conferences, publications, and training programs warned about the dangers of “destructive cults,” a term that became widely used despite lacking a clear legal definition.

The concept of “totalitarian cult,” used and abused by Dvorkin, remained central to Russian anti-cultism. Advocates argued that such groups exercised excessive control over members, isolated them from society, and manipulated their beliefs. Critics, however, noted that the term was often applied broadly to a wide range of foreign minority religions, including groups that had no history of violence or criminal behavior. Scholars of religion frequently criticized Russian anti-cult literature for relying on polemical rather than academic definitions.

Spiritual security, then, served as the basis for a campaign based on paranoia about “foreign” enemies and “foreign” ideas, and for measures to unduly restrict the freedom of religion or belief of Russian citizens who have decided to follow a non-consensual spiritual path.

Russian ideas were also exported abroad through the prominent role that Dvorkin, who served as its Vice President for many years, played in the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism (FECRIS), until he left in 2023 for his support of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Another turning point was the adoption and implementation of the “Law on Combating Extremist Activity” in 2002. This law was originally justified by the need to combat terrorism after 9/11. Still, the federal government increasingly used it in its “spiritual security” crusade to target so-called “religious extremism” and to censor religious literature that certain Russian “experts” deem “extremist.”

The 2002 Law on Combating Extremist Activity employed broad and imprecise definitions of extremism, enabling authorities to investigate and prosecute a wide range of religious organizations.

Over the years, Dvorkin's influence extended beyond public advocacy. In 2009, he was appointed head of the government's Expert Council responsible for advising authorities on the registration and activities of religious organizations. This appointment gave a leading anti-cult activist an institutional role in the implementation of Russia's religious policy, illustrating the increasingly close relationship between anti-cult organizations and the state.

The Law granted the authorities the power to censor religious freedom of expression and to criminalize a broad spectrum of religious activities. From 2004, the government started to prosecute so-called "extremism" and to issue warnings against certain religious activities. The general argument was that the 2002 Law prohibits any form of expression that promotes the superiority of one religion over another, in fact, over the ROC. Article 13 provided for the establishment of a federal list of banned extremist materials.

The first amendment to the 2002 Law was read in the State Duma in 2006. Among other changes to the Law, the definition of what exactly qualifies as extremist activity was broadened to include non-violent acts of civil disobedience. The worrisome amendment provided that:

- a) The definition of extremism shall include libel against state officials related to accusations of extremism or of a particularly grave crime;
- b) any act of violence (incl. hooliganism) against an official shall qualify as extremism; and
- c) not only calls to extremist activity but also "justifications" of extremist activity will be banned.

As a result, the Law now defines extremist activity as "incitement to racial, nationalistic, or religious enmity, and also social enmity." The vagueness of this definition leaves the door open for authorities to label any religious teachings that contradict those of the "traditional religions" as "inciting to religious enmity."

The 2010s saw further convergence between anti-cultism and state security concerns. Laws originally intended to combat terrorism and political extremism were increasingly applied to new religious groups.

New legislation, including the 2016 Yarovaya amendments, imposed further restrictions on missionary activity by limiting religious outreach outside officially approved settings and expanding state monitoring of religious communities.

All these legal measures were weaponized to start banning religious minorities of foreign origin. The most notable example was the 2017 ban on the peaceful movement of Jehovah's Witnesses, labeling it an extremist organization. However, they object to war and military service.

At the same time, the anti-cult movement expanded its focus beyond religion. Concerns about psychological manipulation, commercial self-help organizations, esoteric movements, and internet-based communities became increasingly common. Russian anti-cult activists argued that dangerous forms of social influence could emerge in both religious and secular contexts. Still, they remained more strongly connected to questions of national security, cultural sovereignty, and protection of traditional religious identity.

By the 2020s, anti-cultism had become a stable component of Russia's religious policy environment. Government agencies, Orthodox institutions, and anti-cult organizations frequently collaborated in identifying and criticizing groups considered socially dangerous. Public discussions about "cults" increasingly align with broader state concerns about foreign influence, information security, and ideological cohesion.

More broadly, anti-cult discourse evolved from an Orthodox campaign against specific foreign religious minorities into a framework through which the state justified greater regulation of religious life in the name of national security, spiritual sovereignty, and the protection of traditional values.

The Dvorkin-Rudnev Court Case

In October 2010, Dvorkin gave an interview to *Pravda.ru* concerning Rudnev and "Ashram Shambhala." The article appeared under the headline, "The Organizer of Occult Orgies Faces Prison" (Gumanova 2010).

During the interview, Dvorkin described Rudnev as "a well-known fraudster and swindler with pronounced sadistic tendencies." According to the article, Dvorkin further alleged that, as a result of Ashram Shambhala's activities, "people disappeared," members were subjected to "cruel bullying," and took part in "collective sexual orgies." He also claimed that members "were tortured, beaten, had their heads dipped into toilets, were burned with cigarettes, and were cut."

And he noted that “A few years ago, he [Rudnev] was placed in a psychiatric hospital for an examination of his sanity, but he escaped from the investigation.”

Rudnev subsequently filed a civil action against Dvorkin seeking protection of his honor and reputation and also brought a claim against *Pravda.ru* for moral damages. He requested publication of a right of reply to refute their allegations and sought compensation of 500,000 rubles from *Pravda.ru* and 1,000,000 rubles from Dvorkin.

The Basmanny District Court of Moscow began proceedings in 2011, but none of the defendants—including *Pravda.ru*, Dvorkin, and the journalist who authored the article—appeared at the preliminary hearings. On 26 March 2012, the court dismissed Rudnev’s claims. He appealed the judgment, but on 22 August 2012, the Moscow City Court upheld the dismissal.

The reasons cited by the court to exonerate Dvorkin, identified as D.A.L., of any responsibility are worth mentioning:

The judicial panel considers this conclusion correct, since D.A.L. acted in this case as an official of a public organization. Refusing to satisfy the claims against D.A.L., the court of first instance reasonably proceeded from the fact that, within the meaning of the current civil legislation, the criterion for distinguishing the statements about facts and events from the value judgments (opinions, beliefs) is the possibility of checking such information for its compliance with reality, truth, or falsity. The statement contested by the plaintiff cannot be considered a statement of fact or event, but is an opinion, judgment, or conviction that cannot be verified against reality and therefore cannot be the subject of judicial protection in accordance with Art. 152 of the Russian Federation Civil Code (Civil Division of the Moscow City Court 2012).

According to the judicial panel, the court of first instance reached a “reasonable conclusion” that Dvorkin’s statements contain no allegations of fact but only “opinions.” This conclusion was obviously incorrect, since the statement that members “were tortured, beaten, had their heads dipped into toilets, were burned with cigarettes, and were cut” describes alleged facts and is not an opinion. It should have been “verified against reality,” particularly because Rudnev was not sentenced for these crimes.

The protection the court offered to Dvorkin, thus, was further evidence of the symbiotic relationships between the ROC, anti-cult activists, courts of law, and the media in Russia under the aegis of the Putin regime. It also means that decisions rendered in Russia or publications in Russian media should not be considered as evidence abroad. They belong to the realm of propaganda and, rather than

describing facts, express the position of the ROC and the regime and function as tools used to persecute spiritual and political dissidents.

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Manufacturing Monsters: How Russian Media Constructed the Rudnev Case

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how Russian media—both pro-regime and opposition—constructed Konstantin Rudnev and “Ashram Shambhala” as a paradigmatic “cult” through a durable repertoire of sensationalism, sexual panic, occultism, brainwashing rhetoric, and atrocity narratives. Drawing on media analysis, anti-cult discourse, and the broader religious-political environment of post-Soviet Russia, the study shows that Rudnev’s public image was shaped long before judicial proceedings, through coordinated interactions among state institutions, the Russian Orthodox Church, and anti-cult activists such as Alexander Dvorkin and Alexander Novopashin. The article highlights the paradox that independent, anti-Kremlin outlets—including *Meduza*, *The Moscow Times*, and *Redaktsiya*—reproduced the same anti-cult tropes as state media, relying on apostate testimonies, recycled allegations, and pseudo-scientific notions of “mind control.” This convergence reflects structural biases that transcend political orientation and mirrors similar patterns in Western media influenced by anti-cult networks. The Rudnev case demonstrates how media narratives, once established, circulate transnationally and can be weaponized in foreign jurisdictions, contributing to a global system of stigmatization and legal vulnerability for minority spiritual movements.

KEYWORDS: Konstantin Rudnev, Ashram Shambhala, Anti-cult Movement in Russia, *Meduza*, Alexey Pivovarov.

Introduction

Modern societies often assume that discrimination against religious or spiritual minorities is the product of state policies or police repression. In fact, long before any court intervenes or any government adopts restrictive measures, the media frequently play a decisive role in shaping public perceptions of unfamiliar religious movements. Through sensationalism, selective reporting, and the uncritical repetition of stereotypes, journalists contribute to the construction of an image of certain groups as inherently dangerous, manipulative, or criminal. Once this image has taken root, repression becomes easier to justify, and the

victims of prejudice find themselves isolated, stigmatized, and deprived of the presumption of innocence. The media do not merely reflect social fears; they help create them.

In this article, I will examine how Russian media have contributed to the construction of Konstantin Rudnev as the quintessential “evil cult leader” and his organization, “Ashram Shambhala,” as the stereotypical “cult.” In the first part, I analyze the attitude of the official Russian media, those that support the Putin regime and have long used anti-cult rhetoric as a tool of social control. In the second part, I turn to leading opposition media outlets, whose political stances are radically different yet whose treatment of Rudnev is strikingly similar. The peculiarity of the Rudnev case is that, unlike on other political and social subjects, the attitude of pro-regime and opposition media is substantially the same. I will conclude by exploring the reasons for this apparently counter-intuitive phenomenon and how it reveals deeper structural biases that transcend ideological divisions.

The Russian Media Landscape and the “Cults”

In contemporary Russia, the “official” media landscape is not an open marketplace of competing narratives but a tightly managed ecosystem in which prosecutors, intelligence services, and religious authorities shape public perception long before any court reaches a verdict. This system is particularly visible in cases involving minority spiritual movements, where the state, the Russian Orthodox Church, and anti-cult activists collaborate to produce a single, unified story: the “cult” as a monstrous threat to society. The case of Konstantin Rudnev and “Ashram Shambhala” is a textbook example of how this machinery operates.

Russian media are formally diverse, but in practice, most outlets—national television, regional newspapers, and major online portals—operate within a framework of political loyalty and prosecutorial dependence. In criminal cases, journalists rarely investigate independently. Instead, they repeat narratives provided by the Investigative Committee, the FSB, or local prosecutors. As independent analyses of the Rudnev trial have documented, the court case itself was riddled with contradictions, unreliable witnesses, and procedural irregularities

(Duval, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). Yet none of these complexities appear in mainstream coverage.

The Russian media's role is not to question but to amplify. When the state, the Orthodox Church, and prosecutors decide that a spiritual teacher is a threat (all the more so when this teacher, as Rudnev does, also criticizes the state and the regime), the media machine begins producing stories that portray him as violent, manipulative, sexually deviant, and dangerous. The result is a public consensus formed before any judicial process begins.

This machinery is reinforced by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which enjoys privileged access to state institutions and media platforms. After a revival following the Soviet Union's collapse, the ROC began losing members for various reasons. Competition from spiritual minorities was not a main factor. However, the ROC found it easier to blame the "sheep-stealing" by the "cults" than to investigate the deeper reasons for its decline (Šorytė 2020). Anti-cult activists such as Alexander Dvorkin and Alexander Novopashin—both employees of the Church—serve as "experts" in nearly every media report on new religious movements. Their presence ensures that any alternative spirituality is framed as a "totalitarian cult" (Dvorkin 2002), regardless of evidence (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012).

After 2022, Novopashin and Dvorkin became internationally notorious for their support for the war of aggression against Ukraine and their repeated claims that the Ukrainian government was in league with several "cults," including the Church of Scientology, American Pentecostals, and even Satanists (Berzano and others 2022). In fact, their anti-Ukrainian propaganda had started well before. Their attitude and the protests by Ukrainian academics compelled the anti-cult European federation FECRIS, of which Dvorkin had been Vice President between 2009 and 2023, to publicly sever its ties with the Russian branch led by Dvorkin and Novopashin in 2023 (Introvigne 2025).

Dvorkin and Novopashin both played key roles in the construction of Rudnev as a public enemy of both the state and the church. Novopashin appeared in several media reports on "Ashram Shambhala" and later claimed that at the time of the investigation that led to Rudnev's arrest, he "worked alongside investigators, repeatedly witnessing the seizure of evidence from cult members' apartments," and deprogrammed some of the "cultists" (Lobanov 2023, video 3). This participation of an Orthodox anti-cult priest in the police operation targeting

the apartments of the “cult members” is interesting in itself and shows the inextricable ties between the police, intelligence services, anti-cultists and the Orthodox Church in the repression of religious minorities in Russia.

Dvorkin also appeared often in the media, commenting on Rudnev. In 2010, at the time of Rudnev’s arrest, he defined the official line of the governmental media in an interview he gave to *Pravda.ru* on October 7. Dvorkin called “Ashram Shambhala” “one of the most notorious totalitarian cults” and Rudnev “a famous swindler and a conman with a marked sadistic bent.” He then painted a picture of the “cult” aimed at both scaring and titillating the readers. “Adherents of the cult were subjected to severe bullying and participated in collective sexual orgies,” Dvorkin said. “They were tortured, beaten, dipped in the toilet with their heads, their bodies were burned with cigarettes, and their bodies were cut” (Gumanova 2010).

Dvorkin admitted that evidence of these horrific crimes was scarce (and, in fact, even the biased Russian judges later did not make them part of the charges for which Rudnev was sentenced). Members of the alleged “cult” denied that these events ever happened. He had the usual explanation of anti-cult activists: brainwashing. Dvorkin explained that “the will of the sect members was so suppressed that they did not admit that they were victims. So it was very difficult to open a criminal case” (Gumanova 2010).

The Pro-Regime Russian Media’s Construction of Rudnev as the “Cult Monster”

An analytical examination of a sample of articles published in mainline, pro-regime Russian media before and during Rudnev’s trial identifies seven rhetorical themes. Taken together, they show how the Russian media machine constructs “cult monsters” through a predictable sequence of moves:

1. Sensationalism
2. Sexual panic
3. Occultism and mysticism
4. Brainwashing and psychological enslavement
5. Violence, suicides, and death
6. Financial exploitation

7. Threat to children and families

The Rudnev case contains all these elements, repeated across dozens of articles and television programs.

First, the case is presented as sensational. Readers are told that it is unique and the manifestation of an extraordinary evil. It deserves their full attention.

Second, the moral panic is framed as sexual panic. The headline of *Pravda.ru* when Rudnev was arrested was “The Organizer of Occult Orgies Faces Prison.” Readers were duly informed that the group’s rituals included “naked women” and “sex slaves” (Gumanova 2010). Although Rudnev was sentenced for the alleged sexual abuse of one woman—whose testimony changed during the investigation and the trial and was highly problematic—“organizing orgies” was not part of the charges.

Third, to add another even more sensational note, these “orgies” were “occult.” This was the 21st century, not the 16th, yet the ghost of black magic still haunted the media and their audience. While many are fascinated by esotericism and mysticism, they are, by definition, mysterious and thus can also be used to create fear.

Fourth, Dvorkin and the Russian anti-cult movement had both dominated the media narrative about new religious movements for decades and popularized the notion of “brainwashing” as the signature practice of “destructive cults.” Why do people participate in esoteric-occult and sexually deviant groups that no normal person would join? Because they are “brainwashed.” Why do their “victims” deny being victims? Because the “cults” have developed mysterious techniques to control their minds.

Fifth, even if no evidence emerged, the movement and its leaders were connected to suspicious cases of deaths, suicides, and homicides. Already in 2008, the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* had claimed that Rudnev’s “cult members drove at least three people to suicide,” which proved that Rudnev was “the most dangerous cultist in Russia” (*Komsomolskaya Pravda* 2008). No evidence was provided; the claim functioned purely as moral shock. The article may be the source of the story of one “Vladislav Bolshakov,” described as a “cult member” who allegedly “hanged himself in 2002” and “was buried in nearby forest plantations near Rudnev’s cottage in Plotnikovo.” This was presented as a story told by unnamed disgruntled ex-members who “did not remember exactly” the details. It went viral and

continues to be repeated, traveling from one medium to another. Yet, the various investigations of Rudnev did not find any buried body nor any evidence that “Vladislav Bolshakov” hanged himself.

In 2021, however, the lack-of-evidence problem was solved by the popular TNT reality show “Битва экстрасенсов” (“Battle of the Psychics”), a long-running televised competition among self-proclaimed clairvoyants. As reported by a Siberian tabloid, on the show, a Russian psychic, Maxim Levin, a self-styled “Russian sorcerer,” looked at a photograph of Rudnev and pronounced authoritatively, “There are corpses behind him” (*Sib.fm* 2021).

Sixth, as is typical of their coverage of groups stigmatized as “cults,” media reports emphasize money, property, and fraud. Media published lists and images of apartments, cars, and jewelry allegedly connected to the “cult.” Novopashin later claimed that “The investigator who picked Rudnev up on the first night received a very tempting offer from him; as he told me, Rudnev offered him up to a million dollars in hush money” (Lobanov 2023, video 3). Again, Rudnev was not charged with attempting to bribe a police officer. Unless the anti-cult priest invented the story, the officer failed to inform the prosecutors. He informed only Novopashin. The same Novopashin reports that when he accompanied the police to raid the apartments of the “cult members,” he found “gold jewelry in a plastic bag” in one of them (Lobanov 2023, video 3), as if this were a unique or scandalous detail, or only “cultists” would keep jewels at home.

Seventh, Russian media often portray “cults” as threats to children. They know this danger immediately resonates with their audiences. An anti-Rudnev documentary by the popular television network NTV opens with a mother visiting her son’s grave, reinforcing the narrative of family destruction (NTV n.d.). Allegedly, the son was a member of Rudnev’s school who committed suicide by jumping from a bridge.

The rhetoric is consistent: “cults” break families, steal children, and destroy parental authority. This aligns with the Russian Orthodox Church’s longstanding position that alternative spiritualities undermine traditional values.

By the time Rudnev was arrested, tried, and sentenced, the public had already been conditioned to view him as a monster. The media had produced hundreds of articles, videos, and television segments portraying him as a sexual predator, occult sorcerer, manipulator, and criminal mastermind. This narrative was not the result

of investigative journalism but of a coordinated system in which prosecutors, intelligence services, the Russian Orthodox Church, and anti-cult activists work together to construct “cults” as existential threats.

The Rudnev case demonstrates how easily a spiritual movement can be transformed into a criminal conspiracy through the machinery of state-aligned media. It also shows how difficult it is for courts, scholars, or human rights advocates to challenge a narrative once it has been manufactured.

The media machine does not operate randomly. Rudnev was targeted not only because he founded an independent spiritual movement but also because he criticized the state and the regime. His teachings included elements of anti-authoritarianism, personal autonomy, and rejection of conventional social structures. In a system where spiritual independence is viewed as political dissent, such movements are treated as threats.

Media Critical of the Regime Also Target Rudnev

Rudnev, however, is in a very special position, as he has been the victim of media slander twice. He is slandered by the media loyal to the Putin regime. But even anti-regime, dissident media—those critical of the Kremlin—reproduce the same anti-cult narrative and promote the same “experts,” including Alexander Dvorkin and Alexander Novopashin. The monster-making machine is not limited to state propaganda; it has become a cultural reflex.

A few days after Rudnev was liberated from jail in 2021, the secular liberal magazine *Snob* published a series of three articles on the evil of its “cult.” The first (Pokidova and Valyakin 2021a) told a typical apostate story featuring Elena Zakharova, described as a prominent leader of the “cult” who managed to escape it. “Apostate” is a technical term used by sociologists to identify the minority of ex-members who turn into crusaders against the group they have left. Most ex-members are not apostates. According to other students I interviewed, Zakharova was indeed a senior student, but she somewhat exaggerated her importance in the accounts she gave after she broke with Rudnev. They also report the break was mostly due to personal reasons, as she expected Rudnev to marry her. When this did not happen, they say, she had the typical reaction of a scorned woman.

The second *Snob* article repeated the usual stories of suicides, orgies, and drug dealings based on early Russian media coverage and on Zakharova's tall tales (Pokidova and Valyakin 2021b). The third article follows Zakharova as she transforms from "cultist" to militant anti-cultist, with a project called "Stopsekta" (Stop the Cult), and features the unavoidable Alexander Dvorkin (Pokidova and Valyakin 2021c). Although *Snob* passes for a Westernized magazine, its coverage of the Rudnev case was indistinguishable from state media.

The arrest of Konstantin Rudnev in Argentina in early 2024 produced a wave of Russian media coverage that, at first glance, seemed predictable. State-aligned and specialized anti-cult outlets connected with the Orthodox "cult hunters" repeated the familiar tropes: "cult leader," "sexual exploitation," "occult practices," "dangerous cult." Yet what was surprising was not the behavior of pro-Kremlin media, which have demonized Rudnev for more than two decades, but the reaction of anti-regime outlets—those that pride themselves on independence, professionalism, and resistance to state propaganda. Among them was *Meduza*, arguably the most respected Russian-language independent news organization in exile, known for its investigative rigor and its consistent criticism of the Putin regime. The *Meduza* coverage of Rudnev's arrest in Argentina revealed a striking paradox: even anti-regime media, when confronted with unfamiliar religious movements, esoteric groups, or figures stigmatized as "cult leaders," often reproduce the same narratives as the state.

Meduza's reporting on the Argentine case is a telling example. The outlet repeated, without critical scrutiny, the most implausible claims made by Argentine prosecutors—claims that would not withstand even minimal journalistic verification (*Meduza* 2025). Another dissident outlet, *The Moscow Times*, also reported the same derivative story, mentioning "pseudo-spiritual manipulations" and "extreme control mechanisms" (*The Moscow Times* 2025).

One of the allegations was that a Russian woman who had traveled to Argentina to give birth, as thousands do every year to secure Argentine citizenship for their children, had been "trafficked" by Rudnev for "cultic" and sexual purposes and for reorganizing his "cult" there. The story was absurd on its face. The woman was eight months pregnant. The prosecutors' insinuation that Rudnev required her for sexual exploitation or for organizing a "cult" defies biological reality and common sense. Yet *Meduza* and *The Moscow Times* reported the allegation as fact, without contacting the woman herself, who lives in Moscow. Had they done so, they

would have learned what she told investigators and scholars who later interviewed her: she was not trafficked, was not a victim, was not a member of any “cult,” and had never met Rudnev (Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 31–9).

In the case of *Meduza*, the reliance on clichés about Rudnev is particularly striking because the outlet normally prides itself on careful sourcing and skepticism toward official narratives. Yet here, confronted with a figure long demonized by Russian media, *Meduza* reproduced the slander.

This paradox becomes even more pronounced when we turn to Alexey Pivovarov and his investigative project *Redaktsiya*. In 2025, when Rudnev was arrested in Argentina, he devoted an episode of his program to the case (Pivovarov and others 2025), in which he repeated the usual slander against “Ashram Shambhala” and promoted a documentary series called *Зов Шамбалы* (The Call of Shambhala), released in 2023 by Andrei Lobanov based on his dissertation at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO: Lobanov 2023). Lobanov is interviewed in the *Redaktsiya* video, which acknowledges that “We were helped by Andrei Lobanov, a journalist... who released a major five-part documentary series about the cult” (Pivovarov and others 2025).

Pivovarov is widely regarded as one of the most influential independent journalists in Russia, a consistent critic of the Putin regime, and a figure whose work is often cited as an example of good investigative journalism. Yet when dealing with Rudnev, Pivovarov adopts the same anti-cult framework as state media. The video shows Lobanov reporting information he received from Alexander Novopashin, a fanatical pro-Kremlin activist and an ardent supporter of the war in Ukraine. Lobanov’s thesis was defended in a university run by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Presumably, Pivovarov would never regard “information” supplied by Novopashin as reliable about Ukraine or even religion in Russia in general. Yet, when it comes to “esoteric cults,” all sorts of unconfirmed statements are reported uncritically. The views of *Redaktsiya* on “cults” are indistinguishable from those of the most extreme state propagandists. The video compares Rudnev’s “cult” to the Japanese terrorist movement Aum Shinrikyo and even to Hitler and Nazism. It repeats familiar accusations of “brainwashing” and atrocity stories by disgruntled ex-members. It reports the story of Rudnev’s arrest in Argentina based exclusively on the prosecutors’ statements. It even claims that in the hospital

incident “the young mother was rescued from the cult” (Pivovarov and others 2025), ignoring that the mother emphatically declared that she was not a “victim” nor a member of any “cult” and did not need to be “rescued.”

Pivovarov’s show concludes by lamenting that laws are not effective enough to crack down on “cults” and that such groups typically resist persecution. Yet, if leaders are kept in jail and a significant number of people are arrested, “then a truly severe blow could be dealt to the organization... At least, that’s what I really hope for” (Pivovarov and others 2025). Coming from a “liberal” media outlet, such statements are surprising.

By giving him a prominent role in a *Redaktsiya* episode, Pivovarov also legitimizes Lobanov and the series *The Call of Shambhala*. Lobanov’s videos present a crude anti-cult perspective and follow a predictable pattern. The first episode introduces Ashram Shambhala through the lens of sensationalist allegations, relying heavily on unverified testimony and recycled media narratives. The second episode focuses on coaching, manipulation, and psychological influence (in fact, “brainwashing”), but again without distinguishing between evidence and rumor. The third episode, where Novopashin and Dvorkin appear, presents them as experts on “cults” and allows them to repeat the same anti-cult rhetoric they have used for decades. The last episodes attempt to draw broader conclusions about esoteric movements in Russia, but ultimately reinforce the same stereotypes.

While known for his contempt for the United States, Dvorkin offers a pop-psychology model in *The Call of Shambhala* to identify dangerous “cults,” one that imitates those of Steven Hassan and other American anti-cultists. We learn that the most dangerous “cults” share

five traits: deception during recruitment, manipulation of members’ minds, regulation of all aspects of their lives—that is, totalitarianism—exploitation of members, and the deification of the leader or the organization (Lobanov 2023, video 3).

Of course, a malevolent observer may find these traits in several religions, including the Russian Orthodox Church. Dvorkin then applies this model to the Rudnev case:

As for Ashram Shambhala, everything there is just so rigid, so exposed—all the methods of mind manipulation, mind control, and suppression of individuality are so blatantly on display—that you could practically present it as a textbook example of a cult (Lobanov 2023, video 3).

What is most striking is the crude repetition of anti-cult rhetoric throughout both Lobanov's series and the *Redaktsiya* episode. The language—"manipulation," "mind control," "total obedience," "dangerous cult"—is identical to that used by state media, anti-cult activists, and Orthodox clerical commentators. The series and the episode do not present new evidence, nor do they critically examine the sources of these claims. Instead, they reproduce the narrative constructed around Rudnev since the late 1990s, one that originated in state media campaigns and was later amplified by anti-cult organizations. That Pivovarov does not question the sources and does not realize that theories of "cultic brainwashing" have been discredited for decades as pseudo-scientific by scholars of new religious movements is more than surprising. It raises the question of why anti-Putin media may adopt the same attitude toward Rudnev as pro-Putin media do.

The answer is complex and reveals deep structural features of the Russian media landscape. One explanation is that when it comes to unfamiliar religions and esoteric groups, journalists—regardless of their political orientation—tend to rely on the anti-cult ideology they internalized before becoming dissidents. Many independent journalists began their careers in state-aligned media, where they absorbed the anti-cult framework that has dominated Russian coverage of minority religions since the 1990s. Even after they became critics of the regime, they retained these assumptions that were deeply ingrained in the minds of most Russians, not just journalists.

A second explanation is that some dissidents are not dissidents against the cultural values promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church. They may oppose the political regime, but they share the Church's suspicion of "non-traditional" religions, esoteric movements, and spiritual teachers. In this sense, anti-regime journalists may diverge from the Kremlin on political matters but converge somewhat with it on certain cultural ones. The anti-cult ideology is not perceived as political and is taken for granted.

But in cases such as *Meduza* and Pivovarov, the main explanation is probably another one. These journalists live in two ecosystems: the Russian media and the international media. They admire Western mainstream media and often draw inspiration from it. Yet Western media have their own well-documented bias against groups stigmatized as "cults." *The New York Times*' coverage of Falun Gong has sometimes mirrored Chinese state narratives. The BBC and other

mainstream outlets have treated Scientology with the same hostility found in Russian media, where it is classified as an “undesirable organization.” I have published reviews of a BBC podcast on a Tantric group, a French state television “documentary” on Scientology, and the Lithuanian media’s coverage of a book used to criticize Jehovah’s Witnesses (Šorytė 2025a, 2025b, 2026). They all conform to the same model of *The Call of Shambhala*. “Apostate” ex-members and anti-cultists are used as sources, ignoring the voices of actual members and independent scholars.

The reasons for this bias—ranging from secularist assumptions to the influence of anti-cult lobbies—have been studied extensively (see Šorytė 2024) and need not be analyzed in depth here. What matters is that the bias exists, and that Russian anti-regime media, in imitating Western media, also imitate their anti-cult bias.

One aspect that Russian dissident journalists ignore is that the anti-cult rhetoric prevalent in Western media is, in turn, influenced by Russian sources. As the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) noted in a 2020 report, during his long tenure as Vice President of FECRIS, Dvorkin exported arguments against the “cults” developed within the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian state institutions to the West (USCIRF 2020). Through FECRIS’ lobbying activities, these arguments then penetrated the very Western media that Russian dissidents such as Pivovarov look to as models.

It can be objected that Russian journalists critical of the regime sometimes denounce the repression of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestant groups. But so do Western mainline media, though not always or uniformly. The Jehovah’s Witnesses are a large, well-known organization, and the lies about them spread by the Russian regime are so extreme that in the West only the most enraged anti-cultists would support their repression in Russia. Evangelicals and Pentecostals persecuted in Russia may not be popular among Western anti-cultists, but they have their own lobbies with some capacity to influence the media. But when Russia cracks down on small, unfamiliar esoteric groups with teachings that appear “strange,” both Western media and the Russian dissident media that emulate them revert to the “cult” rhetoric—precisely the rhetoric used by the Putin regime and the Russian Orthodox Church.

This convergence has serious consequences. As the Argentine case demonstrates, articles published in Russia—especially those published by anti-Putin dissidents, who cannot be accused of serving the regime—are

weaponized abroad. Argentine prosecutors cited Russian media coverage to justify Rudnev's detention, including articles from outlets that oppose the Kremlin. The paradox is that anti-regime media, by repeating the same slander as state media, inadvertently further the aims of the Russian regime, which is engaged in the transnational persecution of its dissidents. The demonization of Rudnev, constructed in Russia and reproduced by both pro-regime and anti-regime outlets, has now become part of an international narrative that affects his treatment in Argentina. The attack on Rudnev has also served as a model to slander and prosecute other groups accused of "spiritual abuse."

The case of Konstantin Rudnev thus reveals a deeper problem: the anti-cult ideology is not confined to authoritarian regimes. It is a global phenomenon, present in both state and independent media, in both authoritarian and democratic societies. In Russia, this ideology crosses political boundaries, uniting pro-Kremlin propagandists and anti-regime journalists in a shared hostility toward minority religions. In the international arena, it allows foreign authorities to weaponize Russian media narratives. The result is a transnational system of persecution that transcends political divisions and is sustained by a shared cultural bias against unfamiliar spiritual movements.

The paradox is therefore not merely Russian. It is global. And the case of Rudnev shows how easily media narratives, once constructed, can travel across borders, be adopted by actors with different political agendas, and produce real consequences for individuals caught in their path.

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“If It Bleeds, It Sells”: How Western Media Reproduced Russian Propaganda Against Konstantin Rudnev

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the contemporary state of journalism in relation to the sensationalist treatment of religious groups labeled as “cults.” Focusing on the case of Konstantin Rudnev, a Russian citizen, it analyzes how media reports on his case have reproduced, across different national contexts, narratives originally developed by hostile, ideologized Russian media sources. The essay further investigates the emergence and circulation of these narratives, with particular attention to their connection to Hugues Cascan, Alban Bourdy, and French anti-cult groups. Through an examination of selected Western media outlets, the essay explores patterns of repetition and transmission in reporting on Rudnev, who has been imprisoned for years following accusations he contests and whose current health conditions have raised further concerns. The analysis contributes to the broader discussion on media practices, source verification, and the representation of minority religious groups in contemporary journalism. It also raises questions about the integrity of the journalistic profession and the harm that biased and distorted reporting can cause to people who should always be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

KEYWORDS: Ashram Shambhala, Alban Bourdy, Hugues Cascan, Groupe d’étude du phénomène sectaire (GéPS), Konstantin Rudnev, Yellow Journalism, Media and Cults.

Yellow Journalism

One of the most celebrated rivalries in the history of modern journalism was that between two publishers of the stature of Joseph Pulitzer (1847–1911, Hungarian by birth and originally named József) and William Randolph Hearst (1863–1951), particularly during the 1890s. Both were entrepreneurs (and later politicians), and both quite legitimately sought to make a profit. Yet doubts arise when one considers that, in pursuing that goal, they employed journalism, whose primary purpose is not profit but to inform, perhaps even to explain, theoretically to hold power accountable, and surely to preserve—or at least not to distort—the historical record.

As implied by the very language of communication, the term “media,” the plural of the Latin “medium” (“means”), designates the vehicles through which facts are conveyed to the public. Here lie the roots of the principle, commonly regarded as a hallmark of quality English-language journalism, that facts should be kept separate from opinions. In reality, journalism devoid of opinion is merely an illusion, and perhaps not even a desirable ideal. A journalist’s duty is, in fact, to report facts while at the same time enabling readers to develop a critical, reasoned and documented interpretative framework. That framework should ideally correspond to what civil-law jurisdictions refer to as an “amicus brief”: a systematic presentation of the facts, organized with the utmost logical and argumentative rigor by somebody who acts as a “friend (amicus, in Latin) of the court,” as distinguished from preconceptual advocacy or mere speculation. Thus, the principle of presenting facts separately from opinions should be understood as publishing articles that are neither arbitrary, nor unsubstantiated, nor unverified.

Pulitzer and Hearst, however, held that a swashbuckling approach to news was the easiest way to generate revenue, thus the most desirable. They then pioneered sensationalist, if not outright scandal-mongering, journalism, competing for readers and earnings through screaming headlines, forays into popular culture, and, not infrequently, outright falsehoods. This style came to be known as “yellow journalism” after the character “The Yellow Kid,” also known as Mickey Dugan, the protagonist of the comic strip “Hogan’s Alley” (later published under other titles), created by Richard F. Outcault (1863–1928). A shaven-headed, gap-toothed street urchin who tried to sell newspapers clad in a distinctive yellow nightshirt, the Yellow Kid became so popular that, between 1895 and 1898, both the *New York World* and the *New York Journal*, the rival newspapers owned respectively by Pulitzer and Hearst, published versions of the strip.

To claim that “yellow journalism” established the standard for subsequent media would itself be an exercise in “yellow journalism.” Yet, it is difficult to deny the lasting and growing influence of that model of news-making—and money-making—especially given the skyrocketing costs of the news industry. The driving idea that Hearst cynically popularized in the form “If it bleeds, it leads,” or “it sells,” has in fact remained remarkably persistent, albeit in subtler forms, even among less outspoken publishers. Meanwhile, the fact that the most coveted prize for excellence in journalism bears the name of the unscrupulous

Pulitzer, who established it in his own will (it was first awarded by Columbia University in New York in 1917), is a particularly bitter irony.

Enter "Cults"

Scandals bleed, and they sell best. If serialized, they may even earn prizes for the reporters who expose them. The most scandalous of all bleeding-and-selling scandals are invariably those involving sex, or gossip of a para-, pseudo-, crypto-, or quasi-sexual nature. It is becoming increasingly common, in every country, for mainstream media to rely on sexually suggestive images, headlines, or situations, whether explicit or merely implied. Advertisements employ the same language. And when the two combine, the result is an oversexualized hybrid in the genre now commonly known as "infotainment." Not infrequently, online media also feature side content or advertisements that border on open pornography.

Now, scandals and sex sell best when they bleed from "obscure," "mysterious" and, why not, even "conspiratorial" circles and cabals. "Cults" offer the best examples of this, and for a simple reason: according to the common narrative, a "cult" is associated per se with unorthodox or abusive sexual activities.

In fact, regularly showing little imagination, the stereotypical accusations levelled against "cults" invariably include secretive practices, socially deviant behavior, and public harm disguised as religious or spiritual customs; enticement and perhaps even grooming; the unlawful accumulation and management of substantial financial assets, said to have been acquired through donation schemes involving coercion, psychological manipulation, or other forms of undue pressure; fiscal crimes; manipulation; substance abuses; and, increasingly, human trafficking. It should also be added here that the latter thrives in a context in which laws intended to punish such crimes are increasingly invoked to resurrect discredited theories of psychological coercion (Palmer 2023; Introvigne and Vardé 2025; Vardé 2024, 2025; Introvigne 2026c). What is said to bind together all these unacceptable forms of conduct is "brainwashing" (Introvigne 2022), the quintessential "cultic" catch-all term, invoked to explain every kind of misconduct and, of course, the alleged procurement of illicit sexual favors.

It does not matter whether it is true. Readers are fed the notion that, of course, "cults" engage in such horrible acts precisely because they are "cults"; therefore,

if a group is a “cult,” it must engage in those horrible acts. The need to prove such allegations before accepting them is relegated to the background.

This form of “yellow journalism,” whether found in shabby tabloids, more serious broadsheets or online, begins downstream from the very notion of “cult,” the rule being that a “cult” sells at least as much as hypersexualized content. It, in fact, calls for frenzied consumption, not plain reasoning; it reassures readers in the protected environment of conformist tastes and mass attitudes; it is easy to digest and requires no effort.

Inclusion—with Exceptions

In the media, the words “cult” and “brainwashing” constantly recur in reports concerning religious groups regarded as somehow alternative to mainline religions—whatever “mainline” may actually mean. They also recur in accusations made against “mainline” religions themselves for practices, internal movements, and doctrines considered, in one way or another, excessively “intense” and therefore “extreme.”

But neutral journalists need not sympathize with so-called “cults” to recognize the grave abuse committed by their profession when it abandons its primary responsibility: reporting facts without distortion and providing accurate information. Professional ethics alone should, in fact, suffice. As scholars have abundantly demonstrated in a large number of scientific publications over the last decades, terms such as “cults” and “brainwashing” are, in fact, devoid of any scientific value. They contain no truth. So-called “brainwashing,” or its cognate concept of “mental manipulation,” perceived by its advocates as a kind of super-law capable of explaining human behavior, has been rejected by U.S. jurisprudence and the European Court of Human Rights as inconsistent with established legal principles (Introvigne 2022). When dealing with crimes such as rape, assault, child abuse, or fraud—often attributed to “brainwashing” or “mental manipulation” in cases involving “cults”—ordinary laws already exist and function effectively.

How, then, is it possible that mass media, which by definition address a broad non-specialist public, can use these terms without challenge and arbitrarily weaponize them? This is one of the great mysteries of

contemporary communication. In a world that claims to be increasingly tolerant and inclusive, linguistic guidelines and manuals proliferate, instructing journalists to avoid any word, adjective, or verb that might be considered offensive or disparaging toward groups or individuals, thereby promoting discrimination, stereotyping, body shaming, ridicule, bullying, or hate speech on the grounds of sexual orientation, ethnic background, or skin color. Yet the same standard does not apply in the religious sphere, where empty or even false expressions such as “cults” and “brainwashing” continue to be used routinely, without scandal, to the detriment of the victims—members of religious groups and scholars who demonstrate the inconsistency of such terms.

It seems as though the only convictions and practices that remain legitimately open to attack are religious beliefs and observances. It is as if the last acceptable prejudice were—and remains—a prejudice against religiosity. It is as if a “cult” of communication professionals and journalists committed to the maxim of seeing published only what bleeds aimed to “brainwash” their own readers and consumers by instilling caricatured narratives in their minds. Corruption—moral and otherwise—lies at the foundation of this degenerate approach to information. Some collusions and complicities explain certain improbable secularist wars against religions, both large and small, but in these cases, the profit is ideological.

Western Media A.D. 2026

An insult to the intelligence of readers, who in this way grow more and more uneducated, and a shame to the profession, yellow journalism finds a textbook case in the story of Konstantin Rudnev, which contains all that bleeds and sells: cultism, brainwashing, and sex.

The facts and details of the matter are known (Introvigne and Vardé 2026; Respinti 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e; Introvigne 2026a, 2026b; Di Marzio 2026; Amicarelli 2026a). Many other valuable findings and contributions are contained in the essays collected in the present issue of “The Journal of CESNUR.” And, given the seriousness of Rudnev’s health condition, due in relevant part to ill-treatment during detention, denunciations and pleas for a more humane approach have also been made (*Bitter Winter* 2026; Respinti 2026f, 2026g, 2026h, 2026i).

Research indicates that Rudnev's teachings came to be perceived as a threat by the Russian structures of power, namely the Orthodox Church and the government, operating in close alliance. At the same time, anti-cult activists further contributed to the escalation of the controversy, in a country such as the Russian Federation, where freedom of the press is severely restricted. Anti-cult campaigns targeting religious groups perceived as non-Russian continue to flourish, finding a receptive audience within the aforementioned power structures. The animosity toward Rudnev led to a series of heavily biased journalistic reports that have collectively shaped the public narrative and profoundly influenced readers' perceptions.

When Rudnev was arrested in Argentina in 2025, Western media reacted with a speed and intensity that surprised even seasoned observers of religious-freedom controversies. Within a few days, more than one hundred articles appeared across Europe, North America, and Latin America. Newspapers, television networks, online platforms, and wire services all rushed to cover the case. The tone was uniform: alarmist, sensationalist, and uncritically aligned with the Argentine prosecutors' narrative. It was the largest wave of Western coverage ever devoted to "Ashram Shambhala" (allegedly Rudnev's group) or to Rudnev personally. The contrast with the muted reaction to his first arrest in Russia in 2010 and conviction in 2013 could not have been sharper.

The 2025 arrest created a perfect media storm. A Russian spiritual teacher, a 22-year-old pregnant woman, a group of Russians detained together, and a prosecution eager to present the case as a dramatic victory against human trafficking—these elements were irresistible to Western journalists.

The scale of the coverage was unprecedented. In addition to Latin America, major outlets in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, Finland, Belgium, and Australia published stories. Many of these articles were nearly identical, repeating the same claims in the same order, often using the same vocabulary.

The core narrative came directly from the Argentine prosecutors, who presented Rudnev as the mastermind of a transnational criminal organization. The most dramatic claim was that a young pregnant Russian woman, E., had been "trafficked" by Rudnev from Russia to Argentina for sexual exploitation and "cultic" abuse. The allegation was repeated everywhere, even though no evidence

was ever presented to support it, and the woman herself denied it (Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 31–9).

Another claim repeated across Western media was that the Russians arrested with Rudnev were found in possession of drugs. This assertion was based on a single prosecutorial statement. It was later denied by forensic examination (what was originally described as drugs and hallucinogenic mushrooms was, in fact, sleeping pills and ordinary mushrooms for cooking: Introvigne 2026a). Yet it appeared in dozens of articles, often framed as proof of a “criminal network.”

A third allegation, even more bizarre, was that Rudnev was wanted in Montenegro for organizing the filming of pornographic movies. This claim originated in sensationalist Montenegrin tabloids that had recycled Russian propaganda and invented a connection between Rudnev and an unrelated police operation in Žabljak against a group of Russian tourists, none of whom was prosecuted. Western media repeated it without verification (Amicarelli, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

These three claims—trafficking, drugs, pornography—became the pillars of Western coverage. None of them was true.

Copycat Press

The most influential Western report was a CNN service published on April 11, 2025 (Fernández Martino and Humayan 2025). CNN quoted Argentine prosecutor Fernando Arrigo, a man widely criticized for his cavalier handling of evidence and his almost pathological hostility toward Rudnev (Amicarelli 2026b, Amicarelli 2026c; Di Marzio 2026; Introvigne 2026b). Arrigo claimed that the pregnant woman had been brought to Argentina “[...] for sex trafficking and slavery.” CNN published the quote without questioning it, without seeking independent verification, and without interviewing the woman herself.

CNN also acknowledged that its background information on the Rudnev case in Russia came from official Russian media, particularly the governmental press agency RIA Novosti. This admission was extraordinary. RIA Novosti was not an independent source. It was a state propaganda outlet. Yet CNN treated it as authoritative, repeating its claims about Rudnev’s past without noting that Russian

courts have repeatedly been criticized for fabricating cases against minority religious movements.

If CNN provided the authoritative tone, the Spanish newspaper *El País* provided the sensationalism. In a particularly vicious article, *El País* reported inter alia that Rudnev had been shooting movies of “ritual pornography” in Montenegro, a claim demonstrably false (Rivas Molina 2025).

The most damaging allegation—that Rudnev trafficked a pregnant woman—was also the easiest to disprove. Scholars, including María Vardé (Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 31–9), located the woman, who had returned to Moscow after giving birth in Argentina. She explained that she had traveled to Argentina for the same reason thousands of Russian women do every year: to give birth so that their children can acquire Argentine citizenship. She denied being part of any “cult.” She denied being trafficked. She denied being a victim. She stated that she had never met Rudnev personally. A single interview would have demolished the narrative. Western media did not conduct it.

The contrast with the first wave of Western coverage in 2013 is instructive. When Rudnev was arrested in Russia, Western media paid little attention. The most important article was published in *The Telegraph* (Parfitt 2013), a respected British newspaper, but known for an anti-cult bias, when Rudnev was sentenced in 2013. It limited itself to reproducing official Russian sources. There was no investigation, no interviews, no independent verification. The article was forgotten until Rudnev’s arrest in Argentina in 2025.

Hugues Gascan and Alban Bourdy

One exception to the Western media’s limited interest in Rudnev before the 2025 arrest in Argentina comes from a cluster of French-language publications, all dependent on two figures working together against “cults”: Hugues Gascan and Alban Bourdy (Introvigne 2024; Šorytė 2026, 68–73; Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 2). Their influence was disproportionate to their credibility.

Gascan, a former medical researcher, had reinvented himself as an anti-cult crusader after a personal and professional conflict inside a research laboratory in Angers, France. His accusations against colleagues, his fixation on “cultic infiltration,” and his harassment conviction for stalking a female colleague he

falsely accused of being part of a “cult” connected with “Ashram Shambhala”—upheld by the Court of Cassation (Cour de cassation 2013)—are well documented (Šorytė 2026). His hostility toward anything Tantric became a personal obsession. He later founded Groupe d'étude du phénomène sectaire (GéPS, Study Group of the Cult Phenomenon), a tiny anti-cult group that presented itself as a major investigative force.

Bourdy, who presented himself as a former leader of a French offshoot of “Ashram Shambhala,” reinvented himself as an anti-cult activist after falling in love with the Chilean spiritual teacher María Soledad Domec Espinoza. In his autobiographical 2018 book *Un Bisounours au pays des se(x)ctes* (Bourdy 2018b), he claimed that he had been appointed leader of Ashram Shambhala in France with Rudnev’s approval. He also claimed that Rudnev had issued death threats against Domec, speaking to her from his Siberian prison, when she was trying to separate from him and form her independent group. For anyone familiar with Russian prisons, the story is fantastical. Rudnev was allowed to speak by phone rarely, only with his wife, and calls were monitored. He had disbanded any organization before his arrest and could not have managed or organized a group from jail.

What actually happened is somewhat different: Rudnev taught thousands of students, and while he was in jail, several developed independent teachings, sometimes using the name “Ashram Shambhala” and sometimes hiding references to him while using his books. He was not responsible for their activities and knew nothing about them during the eleven years he was imprisoned. Bourdy also wrote three novelized accounts of evil Tantric groups, his love for Domec, and his horrific experiences in the “cult Ashram Shambhala,” admittedly works of fiction, although “based on a real story” (Bourdy 2014, 2016, 2018a). He never offered any evidence of contact with Rudnev, and his comments about the Russian teacher are based on Russian media and accounts by disgruntled ex-members rather than on direct experience.

Despite this, French anti-cult journalist Olivier Hertel presented Bourdy’s story as credible, even testifying in the French Senate (Sénat 2013). Bourdy also spoke at an anti-cult conference in 2026 in Salamanca (Bourdy 2026), presenting a paper originally prepared for another conference held almost 10 years before and referring to Rudnev as his leader at the time Bourdy was a “cultist,” even though he had never met the Russian spiritual teacher. The French anti-cult organization

Union nationale des associations de défense des familles et de l'individu (UNADFI, National Union of Associations Defending Families and Individuals) cites several articles on its website, unadfi.org, that rely on Gascan and Bourdy, creating an echo chamber that Western media later mistook for independent reporting.

The Western misreading of the Rudnev case can thus be traced to three sources:

1. Early Russian official reports, which framed Ashram Shambhala as a dangerous “cult” and portrayed Rudnev as a criminal.
2. The French cluster centered on Gascan and Bourdy, whose personal grievances and fantasies were mistaken for investigative journalism.
3. The Argentine prosecutors, who in turn relied on Russian sources and provided Western media with sensationalist allegations.

The Religious Illiteracy of the “Free Press”

Originating in Russia, the anti-cult narrative against Rudnev followed him to Montenegro, where no one knew him before the local press began recycling old Russian information and even outdated pictures. In Montenegro, he had no organization, collected no followers, and gave no spiritual teachings. From Montenegro, the same narrative resurfaced in Western media as a perfectly timed ticking time bomb when Rudnev relocated to Argentina. In all cases and countries, the conventional narrative triggered or accompanied police raids, arrests, detention, and inhumane treatment. For sure, the free press in what still claims to be identified as the free world can do better.

The so-called free press in the free world showed such a poverty of creativity that it merely repeated the false claim that Rudnev had escaped from Russia, where his “Ashram Shambhala” had been banned, only to rebuild that allegedly dangerous “cult” elsewhere. The supposedly free press was so eager to follow the Russian cliché that it portrayed Rudnev as the leader of a poisonous “cult” bearing a name that was itself old and spurious (the groups registered by Rudnev in Russia had different designations), a name usable only once it had been properly understood what it actually refers to. Moreover, after his detention in Russia, Rudnev never established any organized group under that name or any other name, either in Montenegro or in Argentina. Most probably, the “exotic” sound of “Ashram Shambhala” (two common terms in East Asian religious and mythological

traditions) was considered perfectly suited to the stereotype of the toxic “cult” and was consequently misused, further offending readers.

Doesn’t the so-called free press feel the weight of the fact that its derivative and formulaic yet calumnious reports may have played, and may perhaps still be playing, an important negative role in the continued denial of transforming Rudnev’s detention in Rawson Prison, Chubut Province, Argentina, into house arrest? Prosecutors have filed repeated appeals against judges who ruled in favor of a man who is in a highly critical health condition and has suffered intolerable treatment after a delicate surgical operation. He is now being requested to be sent back to prison after a short period of house arrest granted for medical reasons.

Why is the so-called free press so vulgar as to repeat falsehoods such as the claim that, in Montenegro, the police raided the place where Rudnev was staying in September 2021 and found a “cult” operating there? (Rudnev debunked this allegation in the interview Respinti 2026b, clarifying an important detail reported in Respinti 2026a; documents support his version; see Amicarelli, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). In fact, it was merely a routine document check that local media distorted by reproducing Russian propaganda, thereby fueling the narrative of the dangerous “cultic” leader being pursued by law enforcement.

Why is the so-called free press doubly vulgar in disseminating lies, such as the claim that the house where Rudnev could enjoy a brief period of house arrest in the Spring and Summer of 2026, while preparing for a delicate surgical intervention with his wife, Tamara Siburova, is a fancy villa with a swimming pool, well-kept gardens, and recreational areas spread over a considerable piece of land? These media are subtly suggesting that they live in luxury and are not a persecuted couple whose human rights and religious liberty are systematically denied with arrogance. In fact, the place itself (as a video reveals: Respinti 2026d) is neglected, damp, and surrounded by swampy ground. Can journalists accurately describe places they have never visited, merely copying information from the internet, as in this case, relying on an advertising description used to rent the property?

Western media, including respected outlets, parroted what tainted sources said. They did not investigate or verify. They did not consult scholars. They did not question the narrative.

The result was a cascade of misinformation that shaped international perceptions and contributed to the persecution of a man whose case deserved scrutiny rather than sensationalism.

The Rudnev case is not only a legal scandal. It is a media scandal. It reveals how easily misinformation can become international, how quickly narratives can solidify, and how difficult it is to correct them once they have spread. It also reveals the anti-cult bias of Western media, which treats any accusation involving a “cult” as inherently credible, even when a quick fact-check would expose it as false.

Western journalism must do better. And Konstantin Rudnev deserves better than to be judged by headlines written thousands of kilometers away, based on rumors, propaganda, and prosecutorial rhetoric.

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