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RUSSIA: Religious issues & persecution. Bimonthly Digest April 16 – 30

RUSSIA: Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest April 16 – 30

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) is calling upon the European Union and the European Parliament to condemn the decision of a Russian court to liquidate SOVA Center, the last source of information on religious freedom issues in the country.

This issue of our bimonthly digest covering religious repression in Russia in the last two weeks of April, is a tribute to SOVA, its director Alexander Verkhovsky and his staff for their difficult and courageous work in the current circumstances.

HRWF (03.05.2023) – SOVA, one of the main sources of information about human rights in Russia, and the last one covering in total independence a wide range of religious freedom issues is about to be liquidated.

On 27 April 2023, Judge Vyacheslav Polyga of the Moscow City Court considered the request filed by Russia's Ministry of Justice to liquidate the Regional Public Association "Sova" and decided to approve it.

SOVA Center, a Russian non-faith-based NGO, is the source of the news we reproduce below. If you go to their website (<https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/>), you will find many more news they published day after day in the last two weeks of April.

Jehovah's Witness Dmitry Barmakin was sentenced to eight years in prison

SOVA (27.04.2023) – On April 27, 2023, the Pervorechensky District Court of Vladivostok sentenced Jehovah's Witness Dmitry Barmakin to eight years in a general regime colony with restriction of liberty for a year. The believer was found guilty under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization).

On April 21, 2023, during the debate, the prosecutor asked Barmakin to be sentenced to nine years in a general regime colony.

A criminal case against Dmitry Barmakin was initiated on July 27, 2018. On the next day he was detained together with his wife Elena and then arrested. In June 2019, the case was sent to court, and in October Barmakin was released from the pre-trial detention center, assigning him a preventive measure in the form of a ban on certain activities. The investigation claimed that from October 15, 2017 to July 28, 2018, Barmakin was the organizer of the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Vladivostok.

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In Perm, for the sake of the feelings of believers paintings in an exhibition were turned against the wall

SOVA (24.04.2023) – On April 23, 2023, the paintings of the exhibition "Let's go. Art-Perm" by Alisa Sokolova were turned over against the wall so as not to offend the feelings of believers.

This was preceded by the visit of Anastasia Subbotina, Director of the Regional Department of National and Religious Relations, to the exhibition. She considered Sokolova's paintings offensive to believers and offered to remove them. The organizers decided to turn the paintings.

According to the artist, the organizers did not return her the money for participating in the exhibition, and the paintings

suffered from a long contact of paint with the wall.

Earlier, Orthodox activists opposed this exhibition, and the organizers blocked Igor Goryachev's sculptures with boxes for fear of hurting religious feelings.

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An atheist prosecuted for offending the feelings of Christians

SOVA (24.04.2023) – On March 17, 2023, a press release distributed by the FSB in the Vladimir region revealed that a criminal case had been opened against a native of Suzdal on the basis of Part 1 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (insulting the religious feelings of believers)

According to the investigation, he published materials in Odnoklassniki, "the content of which is a mockery of the religious feelings of Christians and is aimed at insulting their religious feelings." The press release said that the defendant in the case admitted that he disliked "believers in general and Christianity in particular" as he is an atheist.

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A resident of Moscow was fined for insulting Christian symbols

SOVA (21.04.2023) – On March 9, 2023, the Solntsevsky District Court of Moscow found Pavel Petryakov guilty under Part 2 of Art. 5.26 of the Administrative Code (Deliberate public desecration of religious or liturgical literature, objects of religious veneration, signs or emblems of worldview symbols and paraphernalia or their damage or destruction) and fined him 30 thousand rubles.

In January 2023, he was charged with publishing images *“publicly desecrating religious literature and objects of religious veneration.”*

SOVA commented: “Apparently, they were some collages of existing pictures. The posting of such images on Internet should not in itself be interpreted as a desecration of religious paraphernalia, since the publication of collages does not imply any active actions with the objects of veneration themselves. It should also be noted that the concept of “desecration” is not defined in the legislation.”

The defendant pleaded guilty and deleted the publication.

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Painter Veronica Polonskaya prosecuted for ‘insulting’ the feelings of believers

SOVA (19.04.2023) – On April 4, 2023, the Department of the Investigative Committee for Moscow opened a criminal case against artist Veronika Polonskaya. She is accused under Part 1 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (ublic actions expressing obvious disrespect for society and committed in order to insult the religious feelings of believers).

In April 2022, the artist said that a Moldovan citizen wrote a statement against her because of her four paintings that use the image of Jesus Christ: “Alice in Wonderland”, “Superstar”, “Our Father, if you are in heaven, help for God’s sake, there is nothing to eat” and “The Appearance of Christ to the People”. In the artist’s work, he saw signs of insulting the feelings of Orthodox Christians. Photos of the paintings were published on Polonskaya’s social networks.

SOVA regards the prosecution as illegal: “From our point of view, the indefinite concept of “insulting the religious feelings of believers” introduced into Art. 148 of the Criminal Code does not and cannot have a clear legal meaning. It should also be noted that in the artist’s work there are no signs of incitement to hatred towards representatives of certain religions, otherwise her actions could be qualified under Art. 20.3.1 of the Administrative Code.”

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The Court of Cassation overturned the decision to recognize two collections of hadiths and interpretation of the Koran as extremist

SOVA (19.04.2023) – The case banning the collections of the Sahih al-Bukhari and Bulug al-Maram hadith collections, as well as the first volume of the Al-Saadi’s Entent of the Holy Quran, has been sent back to the court of first instance for reconsideration.

On April 18, 2023, the Sixth Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction overturned the decision to recognize as extremist materials of the collections of hadiths “Sahih al-Bukhari” (Moscow: Umma, 2007) and “Bulyug al-Maram” (Moscow: Publisher Ezhayev, 2008), as well as the first volume of “The Ent of the Holy Quran” by al-Saadi (Moscow: Umma, 2008).

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“Forty Forties”, a movement of Orthodox fundamentalists, demand the cancellation of “Aria” concerts because of blasphemy and Satanism

SOVA (18.04.2023) – On April 15, 2023, the *Forty Forties* called on its supporters to prevent Aria concerts in several regions. They brought musicians to justice for allegedly insulting religious feelings because they allegedly mocked the image of Christ.

Part of the concert tour “A handful of the kingdom of shadows” has already been completed, but from April 17 to December 2, the band’s performances are planned in a number of Russian cities.

“Forty forties” published statement demanding that musicians be brought to justice under Part 1 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (public actions expressing obvious disrespect for society and committed in order to insult the religious feelings of believers).

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In Bryansk, the head of the Baptist church was fined for “illegal” missionary work

SOVA (18.04.2023) – On April 14, 2023, the Volodarsky Magistrate’s Court of Bryansk fined the head of the religious organization “First Church of Evangelical Christian Baptists of Bryansk” Mikhail Lipsky for “illegal” missionary work. The court found him guilty under Part 4 of Art. 5.26 of the Administrative Code (implementation of missionary activities in violation of the requirements of the legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations).

The prosecutor's office established that in January 2023, pastors of this church Mikhail Lipsky and Pavel Zelenchikov held a divine service in the premises of the city house of culture, which was attended by persons who are not members of their church. In addition, religious literature was distributed during the service. According to representatives of the community, they held a Christmas concert at the House of Culture.

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In Akhtubinsk, three Jehovah's Witnesses received seven years in prison each

SOVA (17.04.2023) – On April 17, 2023, the Akhtuba District Court of the Astrakhan Region sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses **Rinat Kiramov, Sergei Korolev and Sergei Kosyanenko**, accused of organizing the activities of an extremist organization (Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code) and financing of extremism (Part 1 of Art. 282.3 of the Criminal Code). Each of them was sentenced to **seven years in prison** with serving his sentence in a general regime colony. In addition, the court imposed additional penalties on them: a three-year ban on activities related to the management and participation in public organizations, as well as restriction of liberty for a year.

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Judicial statistics on cases of "illegal" missionary work for 2022 have been published

SOVA (17.04.2023) – On April 17, 2023, the Judicial Department of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation published

statistical data on the application of Art. 5.26 of the Administrative Code (violation of legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations) in 2022.

According to the department, the number of cases considered under this article increased slightly compared to the previous year: in 2022, 388 such cases were considered (327 in 2021). 238 persons were punished.

Fines remained the most commonly used form of punishment, they were imposed in 186 cases. In 52 cases, a written warning was issued to those prosecuted. In 16 cases, the punishment was supplemented by confiscation, in 4 cases by administrative expulsion from the Russian Federation.

The total amount of fines under the resolutions that came into force amounted to 3,488,000 rubles (in 2021 – 2,285,000 rubles).

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Statistics about those who attended Easter services in 2023: 2% of the population

SOVA (17.04.2023) – In total, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2.8 million people visited churches in Russia on the night of April 15-16. 13,000 divine services were held in 7.8 thousand settlements.

In Moscow, on the night of April 16, more than 600,000 people

participated in the divine services. In total, “during the pre-holiday and holidays”, according to the head of the Department of National Policy and Interregional Relations of Moscow Vitaly Suchkov, more than 2 million people visited the churches. The population of Russia is about 146 million.

In St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region, festive services were held in 411 churches with the participation of about 84,000 people.

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HRWF note:

Most of the titles are HRWF's and not SOVA's

[Further reading about FORB in Russia on HRWF website](#)

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