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RUSSIA: Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest July 01-15

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest July 01-15

14.07.2023 – The state prosecutor asked to sentence Jehovah's Witnesses from Yaroslavl to imprisonment

SOVA – The representative of the prosecutor's office asked the court to sentence **Pyotr Filiznov** and **Andrey Vyushin** to eight years in prison under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code, and **Alexander and Maria Kuznetsov** – to four years under

Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code.

On July 4, 2023, the Dzerzhinsky District Court of Yaroslavl held a debate between the parties in the case of four Jehovah's Witnesses. The public prosecutor asked that Petr Filiznov and Andrey Vyushin be found guilty under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization) and sentence them to eight years in prison in a penal colony with additional penalties in the form of a five-year ban on leading public and religious organizations and participating in them, as well as restriction of freedom for one and a half years.

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13.07.2023 – Court found Lubov Serebryakova, 72, guilty of extremism for reading the Bible.

JW – On July 11, 2023, Olga Chaika, judge of the Kuznetsk District Court of Novokuznetsk, found **Lubov Serebryakova** guilty of extremism because of her religion. The elderly Jehovah's Witness was given a 4-year suspended sentence – a year more than the prosecutor requested for her.

The believer herself does not plead guilty, which she stated to the court: "I performed all my religious actions exclusively within the framework of freedom of religion." The essence of the charges were simply that Serebryakova attended peaceful meetings for worship and made several comments based on the Bible.

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13.07.2023 – Tablighi Jamaat followers detained in Moscow and Moscow region

SOVA – On July 13, 2023, it became known that in Moscow and the Moscow Region, police officers, together with FSB officers, detained followers of Tablighi Jamaat. Three of them are suspected under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization), the remaining seven – under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization).

According to investigators, three natives of Kyrgyzstan organized the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat cell in the Moscow region and involved seven more people in its work. The defendants in the case were detained, searches were carried out in their homes – during the investigation, religious literature was confiscated.

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13.07.2023 – Court in Moscow passed another harsh sentence to three Jehovah's Witnesses—from 4.5 to 6.5 years in a penal colony for their faith

JW – On July 12, 2023, the Savelovsky District Court of Moscow found three Jehovah's Witnesses guilty of extremism for "commenting on portions of [Bible] texts." **Anatoliy Marunov** was sentenced to 6.5 years in a penal colony, **Sergey Tolokonnikov**– to 5 years, and **Roman Mareyev**– to 4.5 years.

More than 100 people went to the courthouse to support the believers. Anatoliy Marunov, 69, who was under house arrest during the investigation and trial was taken into custody after the verdict was announced. All three still plead not guilty and can appeal the verdict.

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07.07.2023 – Case of Jehovah's Witnesses from Karpinsk returned to prosecutor after acquittal overturned

SOVA – After the Supreme Court failed to uphold the acquittal of the three Jehovah's Witnesses, the Sverdlovsk Regional Court simply returned the case to the prosecutor.

On July 6, 2023, the Sverdlovsk Regional Court once again considered the case of Jehovah's Witnesses **Alexander Pryanikov, Venera and Darya Dułova**, charged under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization). The court decided to cancel the guilty verdict issued by the lower court and return the case to the prosecutor to eliminate the violations. Earlier, the same court fully acquitted the defendants, but the Supreme Court of Russia did not agree with this decision.

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07.07.2023 – Long jail terms for Moscow Nursi readers

Forum 18 – Arrested in October 2021, six Muslims who met to study the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi finally went on trial in September 2022. On 27 June 2023, a Moscow court jailed four of the six for 6 years or more, with the others receiving lesser terms. The judge ordered the destruction of books by Nursi taken during the investigation. On 20 June, a Taganrog court jailed Jehovah's Witness *Aleksandr Skvortsov* for 7 years. All were convicted on "extremism" charges, which all denied.

The largest trial for eight years of Muslims who met to study the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi has ended in Moscow with prison terms for all six defendants. On 27 June, the court jailed four of the six for terms of six years or more. These are the harshest punishments handed down to Nursi

readers since **Ilgar Aliyev** was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in 2018. The court sentenced the other two to two years and seven months each.

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07.07.2023 – Süleymançılar: Russia cracks down on Turkish Sufi organization

Bitter Winter – Accused by anti-cultists of being a “pseudo-Islamic cult,” the group has two million members in Turkey and a distinguished history.

Russian anti-cult web sites reported on June 27 on the ongoing crackdown against the Turkish Sufi organization Süleymançılar in Russia.

The FSB cracked down on the organization in Saint Petersburg and is investigating it elsewhere in Russia. It is accused of trying to convert Russian Orthodox believers in violation of anti-proselytization laws, but also of advocating a great Turkish-speaking “Turanic” state that would include parts of Russia, and of “torturing minors,” something connected with the use of corporal punishments in its dormitories and religious boarding schools for male Muslim students.

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06.07.2023 – In Ulyanovsk, a criminal case was opened against a native of Egypt because of a video with the Koran

SOVA – **Said Abu Mustafa** is charged with insulting the feelings of believers and hooliganism. The court took him into custody.

On July 6, 2023, the department of the Investigative Committee for the Ulyanovsk Region reported on the initiation of a

criminal case against a native of Egypt. He became a suspect under Part 1 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (public actions expressing clear disrespect for society and committed in order to offend the religious feelings of believers) and Part 1 of Art. 213 of the Criminal Code (hooliganism motivated by religious hatred or enmity).

On July 7, the detainee was charged, after which the Leninsky District Court of Ulyanovsk took him into custody for two months. The accused is named Said Abu Mustafa (he was also previously referred to as Said Abdelrazek in media reports).

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05.07.2023 – USCIRF releases new reports on Russia's religious freedom violations

Uscirf – The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today released the following new reports on religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation and Russia's religious freedom violations in Ukraine:

Russia Country Update – Since President Vladimir Putin launched his full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russian authorities have continued their systematic harassment and prosecution of religious minority communities within the Russian Federation, while simultaneously launching the largest crackdown on independent civil society in decades. This country update provides an overview of religious freedom conditions in Russia following its most recent invasion of Ukraine.

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04.07.2023 – Court toughens sentence for Jehovah's Witnesses

from Komsomolsk-on-Amur

SOVA – **Tatyana Svoboda, Tatyana Bondarenko and Yelena Nesterova** received five years of probation each.

On July 4, 2023, the Khabarovsk Regional Court partially granted the prosecutor's appeal against the sentence handed down on March 23, 2023 to three Jehovah's Witnesses by the Central District Court of Komsomolsk-on-Amur. The court of first instance sentenced Tatyana Svoboda, Tatyana Bondarenko and Elena Nesterova to five years of suspended imprisonment each with a two-year probationary period under Parts 1.1 and 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (involvement in the activities of an extremist organization and participation in it). The regional court appointed them an additional punishment – a year and eight months of restriction of freedom each.

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03.07.2023 – A Court in Novosibirsk sentenced Dmitriy Dolzhikov to a penal colony for reading the Bible, but replaced the punishment with forced labor

JW – On June 30, 2023, Olga Kovalenko, a judge of the Leninskiy District Court of Novosibirsk, found 45-year-old **Dmitriy Dolzhikov** guilty of extremism, sentenced him to 3 years in a penal colony and a year of restriction of freedom, but his imprisonment was replaced with forced labor. Taking into account the period of detention of Dmitriy under arrest, he will be required to serve about 2 years of forced labor.

Dmitry Dolzhikov does not plead guilty: "I carefully read the decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation dated April 20, 2017 [on the liquidation of legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia], but I have not seen anywhere that the court imposed a ban on practicing the religion of

Jehovah's Witnesses and that believers would be banned from worshipping God, performing religious services, praying and singing religious songs. There has never been such a ban." The verdict has not entered into force and can be appealed. The believer signed a recognizance agreement.

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01.07.2023 – Former Chief Rabbi of Moscow recognized as foreign agent

SOVA – On June 30, 2023, the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation updated the list of foreign agents. Among others, Pinchas Goldshmidt, the former chief rabbi of Moscow, was included among the foreign agents.

According to the Ministry of Justice, Goldschmidt disseminated false information about the actions of the Russian authorities and spoke out against military operations on the territory of Ukraine.

In 2022, Goldschmidt left Russia.

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