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RUSSIA: Seven Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to prison terms since 1 January

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Three Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to six years in prison in two weeks; 76 are in prison in all

HRWF (14.02.2022) – The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses goes on unabated in Russia. Five of them were sentenced to prison terms in January and two more in the first half of February.

Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to prison terms in Russia in 2022 (Update)

07 February 2022: Yuriy Saveliyev, 68 years (6 years + 1 year of restricted freedom)

02 February 2022: Anatoliy Gorbunov, 64 years (6 years)

25 January 2022: Anna Safronova, 57 years (6 years)

20 January 2022: Yevgeny Korotun, 52 years old (7 years + 2 years of restricted freedom)

20 January 2022: Andrei Kolesnichenko, 52 years old (4 years + 1 year of restricted freedom)

19 January 2022: Alexei Ershov, 68 years old (3 years)

17 January 2022: Maksim Beltikov, 42 years old (2 years)

A six-year imprisonment term for 68-year-old Jehovah's Witness Yuriy Saveliyev upheld on appeal in Novosibirsk

JW-Russia.org (09.02.2022) –
<https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2022/02/091403.html> – On February 7, 2022 Novosibirsk Regional Court upheld the sentence of Leninsky District Court of Novosibirsk against Yuriy Saveliyev – 6 years in a general regime colony and 1 year of restricted freedom for believing in God.

As an additional punishment, the court deprived the believer of the right to engage in activities related to administration and participation in public and religious organizations for a period of three years.

Saveliyev called the charges against him trumped up and called himself a victim. He stated: "I lost my health, I lost my

property, my reputation suffered, and now I bear the shameful mark of a '*criminal*'. He can appeal the verdict in cassation and international structures.

An appellate court in a different composition reconsidered the verdict to the believer after the Eighth Court of Cassation of General jurisdiction returned the case to the appellate stage on November 24, 2021.

After his arrest, Yuriy Saveliyev has been behind bars for more than three years. In the colony, where the believer was sent after his conviction, there were attempts to force him to undergo treatment without grounds – in the summer of 2021 Yuriy was sent to Barnaul to a medical correctional facility specializing in the treatment of prisoners with alcoholism and drug addiction, although he does not suffer from either of these diseases. Saveliyev was repeatedly forced to sign a consent to medical procedures. In Correctional Colony No. 1 in the Altai Territory, photos of Yuriy with the caption "prone to extremism" were hung above his bed. The elderly believer should be released in August 2023.

The criminal prosecution of Russian Jehovah's Witnesses was condemned by the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the European Union and many other Russian and international organizations. A Russian Supreme Court Plenum clarification of June 28, 2011, states that joint worship does not by itself constitute a crime under Article 282.2 of the Russian Criminal Code, which the security services use as a reason to persecute Jehovah's Witnesses.

A Krasnoyarsk court sentenced Jehovah's Witness Anatoliy Gorbunov to a six-year prison term for discussing the Bible with fellow believers

JW-Russia.org

(02.02.2022)

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<https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2022/02/021055.html> – On February 2, 2022, Mariya Kunik, judge of the Oktyabrsky District Court of Krasnoyarsk, found 64-year-old Anatoliy Gorbunov guilty of extremism and sentenced him to 6 years in a penal colony. The believer is taken into custody.

In Soviet times, Anatoly Gorbunov's father and grandfather were declared "enemies of the people" and exiled to Siberia. In 1993 they were rehabilitated. Now Anatoly was subjected to groundless repressions for his beliefs. In November 2018, he was searched, accompanied by pressure and threats. 17 months later, a criminal case was opened against Gorbunov. According to investigators, the believer organized discussions with fellow believers of the Christian way of life. This allegedly was the organization of the activities of a banned religious organization (part 1 of article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of Russia).

The court hearings continued for more than a year. In anticipation of the verdict, the believer spent more than 13 months on bail.

During the hearings in court, not a single fact was presented that would prove Gorbunov's guilt in real crimes. Among the materials of the case are 7 discs with records of religious meetings and Bible discussions. No calls for violence, inciting hatred or other illegal actions were recorded on them. The secret witness "Salov", whose testimony, according to the prosecution, was supposed to prove the guilt of the defendant, admitted that he saw Anatoliy only once and did not hear anything extremist from him. There are no victims in the case. Despite this, the prosecutor asked to send Anatoliy to a colony for 8 years.

The believer insists on his complete innocence. In court,

Anatoliy drew attention to the fact that the Supreme Court did not prohibit Jehovah's Witnesses from practicing their faith, this right is enshrined in the Russian Constitution.

In the Krasnoyarsk Territory, 25 Jehovah's Witnesses have already been subjected to criminal prosecution. Five of them were sentenced to various punishments: 2 were sentenced to 6 years in prison, 1 was fined, 2 received suspended sentences.

For the first time in Russia, a court sentenced a woman to a six-year prison term for adhering to the movement of Jehovah's Witnesses

JW-Russia.org (26.01.2022) –
<https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2022/01/260838.html> – On January 25, 2022, Aleksandr Lepsky, a judge of the Trusovskiy District Court of Astrakhan, considered Anna Safronova's participation in Bible discussions extremism and sentenced her to 6 years in a penal colony, as requested by the prosecutor. After the verdict was announced, the believer was taken into custody.

In her last speech, Safronova said: "A conscience taught by the Bible does not allow me to harm the state and the people living in it. I have nothing to do with extremism. I am actually accused of believing in Jehovah God, praying to him, talking to others about the Bible and remaining a Jehovah's Witness, that is, enjoying the right guaranteed by Article 28 of the Constitution." As in other "extremist" cases against Jehovah's Witnesses, in Safronova's case there are no victims or damage caused to anyone or anything. The verdict has not entered into force and can be appealed.

Anna Safronova is a 56-year-old widow. She takes care of her mother, who is already over 80. The women had to go through

searches twice. The first one took place in the summer of 2020, when a raid took place in the homes of 26 more families of believers. Then Anna was a witness in the case of other Astrakhan believers accused of extremism. A year later, Anna and her mother's apartment was searched again. This time, Safronova was already a suspect. She was interrogated and sent to the detention center for 1 day.

On May 28, 2021, the investigator for especially important cases of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Astrakhan Region, Nikolay Banko, opened a criminal case against Anna Safronova under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 and part 1 of Art. 282.3 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, accusing her of participating in worship services of Jehovah's Witnesses and financing extremist activities. Among the evidence of Anna's "criminal intent" is a discussion of the Bible with fellow believers via video link and the singing of songs and prayers to Jehovah God. The investigation considers the financing of extremism to be the fact that Safronova helped collect voluntary donations for the common needs of believers. For example, to pay for the ZOOM program, video cameras and microphones to communicate with fellow believers. Almost immediately after the initiation of the criminal case, Anna was included in the list of extremists of Rosfinmonitoring, due to which her bank accounts were blocked.

Anna Safronova became the first woman, Jehovah's Witness, in Russia to be sentenced to such a long prison term. In addition to her, after the guilty verdict, two more believers are currently behind bars: Olga Ivanova from Astrakhan (sentence – 3.5 years) and Valentina Baranovskaya from Abakan (2 years). In addition, Olga Ponomareva and Anna Yermak from the Krasnodar village of Kholmskaya were sentenced in absentia to 5 and 4.5 years in prison, respectively. Another woman, Tatyana Velizhanina from Sochi, is awaiting a court decision in a pre-trial detention center.

According to the decision of the Plenum of the Supreme Court

of October 28, 2021, “the divine services of Jehovah’s Witnesses, their joint performance of rites and ceremonies, in themselves do not constitute a crime under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, despite the liquidation of their legal entities.

Photo: gettyimages

HRWF Note

For daily update of the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, see <https://www.jw-russia.org>

See the mapping of JW prisoners in Russia at <https://www.jw-russia.org/docs/prison.html>

See the database of JW prisoners in Russia with their picture, bio and court proceedings details at <https://www.jw-russia.org/prisoners.html>

Further reading about FORB in Russia on HRWF website

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