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## **Russia intensifies persecution for reading the Bible in occupied Crimea**

By Halya Coynash

Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (16.03.21) - <https://bit.ly/30YxK6M> - A Russian-controlled court in Simferopol has placed 42-year-old Ukrainian **Taras Kuzio** under house arrest following mass armed searches of Jehovah's Witnesses' homes in occupied Yalta. The occupation regime has slightly varied the charge this time, although Kuzio is facing the same persecution as other believers for practising his faith.

The hearing on 12 March at the 'Kievsky District Court' took place behind closed doors, and with a lawyer appointed by the 'investigators'. Crimean Solidarity civic journalists were therefore unable to attend the hearing, but [cite their own source](#) in reporting that Kuzio is charged with 'financing an extremist organization' under Article 282.3 § 1 of Russia's criminal code. The 'court' took into account Kuzio's two underage children; his state of health and his social ties with Yalta, and ordered house arrest, rather than full detention, as demanded by the 'investigators'. Kuzio has also been ordered to have no

contact with others involved in the 'case' and has been prohibited from using the Internet, sending or receiving mail.

Kuzio's family plan to appeal against the ruling.

13 armed searches [were carried out](#) on 11 March by the Investigative Committee and FSB, accompanied by Russian-controlled police and OMON [riot police] officers. Four believers were interrogated, with Kuzio detained. The searches were 'authorized' by Kievsky District Court 'judge' **Viktor Krapko**.

Although the charge is very slightly different from the usual Article 282.2 § 1 ('organizing the activity of a religious organization whose dissolution has been ordered due to extremist activities'), it is almost certainly based on the same activities. Since the shocking Supreme Court ruling from 20 April 2017, which outlawed the Jehovah's Witnesses as a supposedly 'extremist organization, believers have been persecuted in Russia and in occupied Crimea for reading the Bible in groups, taking part in shared prayers, etc.

There were also [searches on 10 February](#) at the homes of **Andriy Rogutsky** and **Lyudmila Shevchenko** with the FSB & Co. removing **Bibles**, notebooks and electronic devices.

Kuzio has been the target of Russian religious persecution since 20 March 2019 when at least [six armed searches were carried out](#) in Yalta and neighbouring Alushta.

Although the renowned Memorial Human Rights Centre [reported](#) two men: Kuzio and **Artem Gerasimov** as being charged under Article 282.2 § 1 following that 'operation', the only 'trial' was of Gerasimov, and he was only under an undertaking not to leave Yalta.

Gerasimov's 'trial' was the second persecution of a Jehovah's Witness in occupied Crimea, and took place almost in parallel with the case of **Serhiy Filatov**, a father of four from Dzhankoy, who had been arrested after [the first round of armed searches](#) during the night from 15-16 November 2018.

It was probably because of [the appalling six-year sentence](#) against Filatov on 5 March 2020, that Gerasimov was initially 'only fined' despite the Russian-controlled prosecutor, **Oksana Chuchuyeva**, [having demanded](#) a six and a half year sentence. It is quite likely that the plan was to see what the western reaction was to this first prison sentence passed down by an occupying state against a person accused only of practising his faith. If that was the intention, then the reaction, or lack of it, made Russia brazen enough, on 4 June 2020, to revoke the first ruling against Gerasimov and [sentence him to six years' imprisonment](#).

Worth stressing that such FSB persecution of believers is generally accompanied by propaganda exercises on Russian-state controlled media. The latter, in reporting the March 2019 armed raids which first targeted both Gerasimov and Kuzio, [claimed](#) that the FSB had 'broken up a Jehovah's Witness cell'. [A video](#) on Vesti.Krym showed burly men in masks and military gear making their way into what is presumably Gerasimov's home and demonstrating religious material, including the Bible, as though it were 'evidence'. On 10 March 2021, a Russian Cassation Court [rejected](#) the cassation appeal brought against Filatov's sentence.

The mounting persecution of believers in Russia and occupied Crimea, and the increasingly severe sentences passed, give grounds for concern about the 'trial' in occupied Sevastopol of 54-year-old **Viktor Stashevsky** which is now coming to an end. Unfortunately, the 'judge' in that case is **Pavel Kryllo** from the Gagarin District Court, who has already been involved in the politically-motivated trial of one Ukrainian ([Ihor Movenko](#) ).

On 26 May 2020, the very same day that Filatov's 6-year sentence was upheld, armed FSB, Rosgvardia and masked OMON [riot police] officers [burst into four homes](#) in occupied Kerch on 26 May 2020, with **Artem Shabliy**, a 29-year-old father of two, arrested. The criminal proceedings are known to have been initiated by 'investigator' **Valery Zarubin** with Shabliy accused of having "drawn others into the activities of an extremist organization" by discussing the Bible with them.

The armed searches on nine Jehovah's Witness homes in Sevastopol on 1 October 2020 resulted in the arrests of four men: 51-year-old **Yevhen Zhukov; Volodymyr Maladyka** (57); **Volodymyr Sakada** (50) and **Ihor Schmidt** (48) All of them were remanded in custody the following day and remain imprisoned to this day.

Photo : Investigative Committee image with men forcing their way into a home, although in none of these cases has anybody shown resistance, Taras Kuzio, photo probably from 2019

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## Special bimonthly on freedom of religion or belief (01-15.03.2021)

### 15.03.21 - Russian repression of religious minorities promoted in Paris

The notorious Alexander Dvorkin and some of his friends claimed they are those who are persecuted—by the U.S. and Bitter Winter.

[Continue reading...](#)

### 15.03.21 - The Court of the Jewish autonomous region confirmed the conviction of Yevgeniy Golik: 2.5 years of probation for talking about the Bible

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/03/9.html>

On March 15, 2021, the judge of the Nadezhdinsky District Court of the Primorsky Territory, Diana Merzlyakova, considered the participation of 77-year-old Vladimir Filippov in peaceful religious services as extremism and sentenced him to 6 years of probation with a probationary period of 4 years and restriction of freedom for 1 year.

[Continue reading...](#)

### 12.03.21 - A Chelyabinsk court sentenced 73-year-old Valentina Suvorova, a past award recipient for dedication to her profession, to a two-year probation for reading the Bible

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/03/8.html>

CLARIFICATION. On March 11, 2021, the Metallurgicheskiy District Court of Chelyabinsk labeled Valentina Suvorova's, a retiree, activities as extremist because she "sang songs" and "prayed to Jehovah God." The believer was given a two-year suspended sentence with additional restrictions on certain activities for a period of six months and a one-year

probationary period (initially it was reported that the believer was given a one-year suspended sentence).

[Continue reading...](#)

### **12.03.21 - Jewish Autonomous Region court upholds Anastasiya Sycheva's suspended sentence for participating in Jehovah's Witnesses worship services**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/03/6.html>

On March 11, 2021, the court of the Jewish Autonomous Region upheld the conditional sentence of 43-year-old Anastasiya Sycheva from Obluchye. The verdict entered into force. The believer insists on her innocence. She has the right to appeal against the verdict in cassation, as well as in international instances.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **11.03.21 - Kursk court rules that Jehovah's Witness from Denmark illegally placed in solitary confinement**

Kursk, March 11, Interfax - A Kursk Region Court has upheld a decision determining that Danish citizen Dennis Christensen, who was convicted in a case involving organization of the activities of the *Jehovah's Witnesses* organization (recognized as extremist and banned in Russia), was placed in solitary confinement illegally, the court press service said.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **11.01.21 - A wave of searches in homes of believers in Yalta. A new criminal case was initiated**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/03/7.html>

On March 11, 2021, one more series of searches took place in Yalta in at least 9 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses. Four people were detained for interrogation, one of them was taken by the security forces to Simferopol.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **11.03.21 - A sixth criminal case in the Amur Region. FSB searches 12 Belogorsk-based believers**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/03/5.html>

On the morning of March 4, 2021, groups of security officials conducted searches at 6 addresses in the city of Belogorsk (Amur Region). 12 believers were taken to the local FSB department and later released. A criminal case was initiated for extremist activity based on religion.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **10.03.21 - A State prosecutor requested an unprecedented sentence for Jehovah's Witnesses from Volgograd – nine years in prison for practicing one's faith**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/03/4.html>

On March 9, 2021, during the debate in the criminal case against four Jehovah's Witnesses in Volgograd, assistant prosecutor Anna Myagkova requested 9 years in a general regime colony for Valery Rogozin and Denis Peresunko, and 7 years for Igor Yegozaryan and Sergey Melnik.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **05.03.21 - A Nizhny Novgorod court sentenced Sergey Verkhoturov to six years of suspended sentence for reading the Bible**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/03/3.html>

On March 5, 2021, Denis Kiselyov, a Prioksky District Court judge, found Sergey Verkhoturov guilty of organizing the activities of a banned organization and sentenced him to a six-year suspended sentence with a four-year probationary period. The believer is insisting he is completely innocent.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **03.03.21 - Moscow, the old believers in defence of Jehovah's Witnesses**

The schismatic 17th century community defends "the inalienable right" for the outlawed religious group, even if "they do not share doctrine and ideas". The Old Believers have suffered past "destruction of churches, confiscation of sanctuaries", with "exile and imprisonment, torture and the death penalty". The repression of freedom of conscience raises tensions, conflicts and divisions in society.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **03.03.21 - Putin orders Interior Ministry to prosecute provocateurs, suppress all manifestations of extremism**

Moscow, March 3, Interfax - Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered the Interior Ministry to resolutely suppress all manifestations of extremism and to prosecute provocateurs who incite people to commit unlawful acts.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **March 21 - Situation review of human rights in 2021**

The monitoring review was prepared by the Crimean Human Rights Group on the Basis of materials collected in February 2021.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **03.03.21 - Homes of Jehovah's Witnesses were searched in Syktyvkar. Three believers are now behind bars**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/03/1.html>

On the morning of March 2, 2021, at least 14 families of local believers were searched in Syktyvkar. Four men were detained and placed in a temporary detention center. One of them, 59-year-old Sergei Ushakhin, was later released on recognizance not to leave. The rest are awaiting a court decision as they are prevented.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **02.03.21 - A Rostov-on-Don appeal upheld the conviction of believer Ruslan Alyyev**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/03/2.html>

On March 1, 2021, the Rostov Regional Court upheld the sentence against Ruslan Alyev. The court of appeal recognized him as a member of a banned organization. The believer will be imprisoned for 2.5 years conditionally.

[Continue reading...](#)

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## **Deteriorating religious freedom situation denounced at the OSCE**

### ***Speech delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Courtney Austrian to the Permanent Council, Vienna: [US Mission to the OSCE \(04.03.2021\)](#)/ Excerpt***

"In recent months, the Kremlin intensified its efforts to suppress independent voices and viewpoints, including those of members of civil society organizations, human rights defenders, independent journalists, political opposition members, and believers belonging to religious minority communities. With each repressive action, Russia's authorities demonstrate an abiding contempt for their international legal obligations and OSCE commitments to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Wielding overly broad "anti-extremism" and "anti-terrorism" laws as political weapons, authorities continue to raid, arrest, and prosecute peaceful believers, including members of certain Muslim groups and Jehovah's Witnesses. On February 24, a Russian court handed down a two-year prison sentence to 69-year-old Valentina Baranovskaya—the first time a court has consigned a female Jehovah's Witness to a prison term. Her son, Roman Baranovsky, received a six-year sentence.

According to credible reports, Russia now imprisons 51 Jehovah's Witnesses, and the human rights group *Memorial* currently recognizes 298 individuals in Russia as prisoners held due to their religious beliefs."

### ***[Speech delivered by UK Ambassador Neil Bush at the OSCE Permanent Council \(04.03.2021\)](#)/ Excerpt***

"(...) We must also highlight - unfortunately not for the first time - the concerning situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation. The 2017 ruling of the Russian Supreme Court, which rejected the appeal against the decision to categorise Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremists", criminalised the peaceful worship of 175,000 Russian citizens and contravened the right to religious freedom that is enshrined in the Russian Constitution, and in multiple OSCE commitments.

Since that 2017 ruling, we have witnessed an increasing number of detentions, criminal investigations and prosecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses across Russia, including the arrest and sentencing of Valentina Baranovskaya and Roman Baranovskiy on 24 February, and the sentencing of Aleksandr Ivshin on 10 February. Such cases reinforce the impression of an organised campaign of persecution against Jehovah's Witnesses."

#### **Other recent statements from the U.S. this year:**

February 25, [Ned Price, State Dept Spokesperson](#)

February 24, [USCIRF Commissioner Bauer](#)

February 11, [Ned Price, State Dept Spokesperson](#)

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## **Special bimonthly on freedom of religion or belief (16-28.02.2021)**

### **26.02.21 - Defrocked priest Sergy's pretrial detention extended until end of spring**

The Basmanly District Court of Moscow has agreed on a three-month extension of the pretrial arrest of ex-priest Sergy Romanov, charged with several crimes, including inducement to suicide.

"The court has granted the investigator's petition. Nikolay Romanov's measure of restraint in the form of remand has been extended until May 28, 2021," court spokesperson Irina Sofinskaya told *Interfax*

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### **26.02.21 - More than 50 Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned - an anti-record of persecution for practicing one's faith**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/17.html>

By February 25, 2021, the number of Jehovah's Witnesses simultaneously placed in Russian [colonies and pre-trial detention centers](#) reached 51. In just 3.5 years after the decision of the Supreme Court to liquidate 396 legal entities of this religion, 230 people in the country went through places of imprisonment.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **26.02.21 - The Kostroma Court of Appeals commuted Sergey and Valeriya Rayman's strict sentence**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/18.html>

On February 26, 2021, the Kostroma Regional Court, having considered the appeal of the Rayman spouses, canceled the longest suspended sentence for faith - 8 and 7 years. Earlier, a lower court found Sergey and Valeriya guilty of organizing and participating in extremist activities.

**Continue reading...**

### **25.02.21 - CRIMEA: Muslim meetings for worship main target of "anti-missionary" prosecutions**

Of the 13 individuals fined under Russia's "anti-missionary" laws in 2020 in Russian-occupied Crimea, 10 were imams leading meetings for worship in mosques outside the framework of the Russian-backed Crimean Muslim Board. "What will the state's next step be?"

**Continue reading...**

### **25.02.21 - The case of six Jehovah's Witnesses from Orenburg is back in court**

Link to full text in Russian:

[www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2021/02/d43729/](http://www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2021/02/d43729/)

A court in Orenburg will begin reviewing in March the case of six Jehovah's Witnesses that had previously been returned to the prosecutor. In February 2021 the case of six Jehovah's Witnesses was resubmitted to the Industrial District Court of Orenburg. The first court session was scheduled for March 1.

**Continue reading...**

### **24.02.21 - New cases against Jehovah's Witnesses initiated in Birobidzhan**

Link to full text in Russian: [www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2021/02/d43717/](http://www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2021/02/d43717/)

One year after the case against Jehovah's Witness Postnikov was opened, his wife was also persecuted.

**Continue reading...**

### **24.02.21 - Series of searches in homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Vladimir region**

Link to full text in Russian: [www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2021/02/d43702/](http://www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2021/02/d43702/)

On February 19, 2021, it became known that a series of searches took place in the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses followers in Kovrov, Vladimir region.

[Continue reading...](#)

**24.02.21 - A 70-year-old Khakasia-based woman was sentenced to two years in a penal colony for practicing her faith. Her son was sentenced to six years in a penal colony. They are Jehovah's Witnesses**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/16.html>

On February 24, 2021, Abakan city court passed an unprecedentedly cruel sentence: for the first time a woman, who is also elderly, was sentenced to imprisonment. For the first time, a person is imprisoned under the milder part of article 282.2 (participation in a banned organization) of the RF Criminal Code. This is the case of Valentina Baranovskaya.

[Continue reading...](#)

**24.02.21 - Homes of two Jehovah's Witnesses in Razdolnoye, a Crimean village, were searched. A religious book was planted in the home of a 72-year-old believer**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/15.html>

On February 10, 2021, in the village of Razdolnoye (Razdolnensky District, Crimea), security forces examined the homes of two local Jehovah's Witnesses: Andrey Rogutskiy and Lyudmila Shevchenko. Bibles, notebooks, electronic devices were confiscated from believers.

[Continue reading...](#)

**24.02.21 - The Russian Foreign Ministry claims that Jehovah's Witnesses have the right to practice their religion in groups. Why then are there dozens of believers that are imprisoned?**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/14.html>

"Members of a liquidated organization may worship independently, including as part of religious groups that do not require registration..." the Russian Foreign Ministry response, dated 20 February 2021, reads.

[Continue reading...](#)

**19.02.21 - Vladimir region siloviki join in religious persecution. A series of searches took place in Kovrov**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/13.html>

On February 17, 2021, believers from the Kovrov city reported searches that had taken place at least at 6 addresses. 14 people were detained and taken away for interrogation, including elderly ones. Details are being clarified.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **17.02.21 - RUSSIA: Early release applications denied**

Six Jehovah's Witnesses jailed on "extremism"-related charges applied for early release after serving half their jail terms, but have been unsuccessful. Prison administrations opposed the applications with what Jehovah's Witnesses describe as "fabricated evidence" of violations of prison rules.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **16.02.21 - New searches of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Kemerovo region. A 53-year-old believer was detained; the court will be deciding which restrictions to place on him**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/9.html>

On Sunday, February 14, 2021, at least six Jehovah's Witnesses were searched in the city of Belovo (Kemerovo region). Sergey Ananin, 53, was detained and taken to a temporary detention center.

[Continue reading...](#)

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## **Early release applications denied**

***Six Jehovah's Witnesses jailed on "extremism"-related charges applied for early release after serving half their jail terms, but have been unsuccessful. Prison administrations opposed the applications with what Jehovah's Witnesses describe as "fabricated evidence" of violations of prison rules. Four of the prisoners were accused of smoking in the wrong place, but Jehovah's Witnesses do not smoke. Another Jehovah's Witness jailed since 2018 and a Muslim reader of Nursi's works jailed since 2017 should both become eligible to apply in summer 2021.***

By Victoria Arnold

Forum18 (17.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3azFq51> - Six Jehovah's Witnesses jailed on "extremism"-related charges for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief have so far failed in their applications for early release. On the fourth attempt, a court commuted the rest of Dennis Christensen's jail term to a fine, but this was overturned after prosecutors appealed and he remains in jail. Four jailed Jehovah's Witnesses from Saratov have similarly failed in their appeals for early release, while a fifth is still awaiting a hearing.

Prison administrations opposed the applications with what Jehovah's Witnesses describe as "fabricated evidence" of violations of prison rules. In the Saratov case, four of the prisoners were accused of breaking prison rules by smoking in the wrong place, but Jehovah's Witnesses do not smoke at all (see below).

Both prosecutors and prison authorities opposed early release in the case of one of the Saratov five, Konstantin Bazhenov, as they claimed he had not been "reformed", but "continues to study, believe, and spread the ideology of Jehovah's Witnesses", a Jehovah's Witness spokesperson told Forum 18 (see below).

Forum 18 asked the administration of Kursk Region Labour Camp ("Correctional Colony") No.3 in Lgov, where Christensen is being held why, he is considered to have violated prison protocol, and why he is considered so dangerous that he must remain jailed. It refused to comment, citing the law on personal privacy. Kursk Region Prosecutor's Office insisted to Forum 18 that Christensen "repeatedly violated the established routine [of the labour camp]" and had been punished for this (see below).

Forum 18 asked the administration of Ulyanovsk Region Labour Camp No. 3 in Dimitrovgrad, where Bazhenov is being held, why Jehovah's Witness beliefs are grounds for refusing early release when it is the activities of legal entities which were banned, not the Jehovah's Witness religion. Forum 18 received no reply (see below).

Forum 18 asked the administration of Orenburg Region Labour Camp No. 1 in the city of Orenburg, where the other four Jehovah's Witnesses from Saratov are being held, how they broke prison regulations, why they were considered so dangerous that they should be behind bars, and why it had claimed in court that they had been smoking when this is forbidden by their beliefs. Forum 18 received no reply (see below).

Between June 2017 and July 2018, six Muslims who met to study the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi have received prison sentences on "extremism"-related charges, of whom one – Ilgar Aliyev - is still in prison. None is known to have applied for early release, but Aliyev should be eligible to apply for early release in April 2021 (see below).

Once a court has rejected an appeal for early release, a prisoner must wait a further six months before lodging a further application (see below).

All the more than 60 Jehovah's Witnesses brought to criminal trial on "extremism"-related charges since the 2017 nationwide ban have been convicted, with several being jailed. Appeals have not overturned any convictions. In a few cases, appeal courts increased or reduced the punishment. Muslims who met to read the works of Said Nursi similarly convicted on "extremism"-related charges have also tended to be unsuccessful at appeal.

### **Early release**

According to Article 80 of the Criminal Code, people serving jail sentences have the right (after a certain period of time) to apply to be released early and serve a lesser punishment instead of their remaining terms of imprisonment.

The more serious the offence for which a person has been convicted, the longer they must stay imprisoned before applying for a change of punishment. Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of Nursi's works tend to be prosecuted under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ("Organising" or "Participating in" "the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity").

Under this Article, a prisoner may request to be released after serving half their term, as long as they spend at least six months imprisoned. This period is calculated from the day

a person is first detained (which is often long before trial), not from when the sentence comes into force.

Six Jehovah's Witnesses have applied for early release, but with no success, largely because prison administrations refused to support them. Between [June 2017](#) and [July 2018](#), six Muslim men were jailed for periods of between two and eight years for meeting together to study Nursi's works. None is known to have applied for early release.

At present, only one Muslim reader of Nursi's works remains imprisoned – Ilgar Vagifogly Aliyev. A Dagestan court [sentenced him to eight years' imprisonment in May 2018](#). He was first detained in April 2017; if he decides to request that the remainder of his sentence be replaced with a lesser punishment, he could therefore do so in April 2021 (see below).

Whether inmates in general manage to get early release "all depends on the particular prison", Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Yaroslav Sivulsky commented to Forum 18 on 3 February. "But usually prisons are in no rush to get rid of cheap labour too quickly." He believes that Jehovah's Witnesses are being treated differently, noting that Konstantin Bazhenov (see below) was not released despite positive character references from members of the prison staff.

### ***Christensen: Early release application denied***

Danish citizen Dennis Ole Christensen (born 18 December 1972) was [sentenced to six years' imprisonment on 6 February 2019](#). Taking into account time spent in pre-trial detention, he was due to serve about a further three years. Prosecutors accused him of "continuing the activities" of the local Jehovah's Witness registered religious organisation in Oryol, which had been [declared "extremist" by a local court and liquidated in June 2016](#), before the nationwide ban.

On 23 June 2020, Lgov District Court (Kursk Region) decided that Christensen's remaining prison sentence [should be commuted to a fine of 400,000 Roubles](#). This was the first time a court changed a Jehovah's Witness prisoner's remaining jail term to a non-custodial punishment. Christensen had previously applied for early release three times, but had been turned down during the application process.

Prosecutors, despite originally supporting Christensen's application, then appealed against the court decision. On 4 September 2020, Kursk Regional Court sent the matter back for re-examination. On 26 October 2020, the district court [ruled that Christensen should not be released](#), and Kursk Regional Court upheld this decision on 10 February 2021. He may submit a new application only after six months have passed.

Both prosecutors and the prison administration opposed early release, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Yaroslav Sivulsky told Forum 18 on 15 January 2021, though the prosecutor initially supported it in court. The prison authorities presented "fabricated evidence" of Christensen breaking prison rules – for example, by communicating with people in other cells, which he denies – leading to his being labelled a "malicious violator of prison protocol", Sivulsky stated.

On 22 January, Forum 18 asked the administration of Labour Camp No. 3 in Lgov why Christensen is considered to have violated prison protocol, and why he is considered so dangerous that he must remain jailed. Aleksandr Budantsev, acting head of Kursk Region Prison Service, replied on 1 February that he could not answer the first question because of the Federal Law on Personal Information (which protects individuals' privacy). He noted that a decision on reducing punishment is taken by a court and is not within the competence of the prison administration.

On 25 January, Forum 18 asked Kursk Region Prosecutor's Office why it had first supported and then opposed Christensen's application for early release. In his reply of 9 February, Aleksey Shatunov of the Prosecutor's Office for Overseeing Compliance with the Law in Correctional Institutions did not answer this question. He explained that prosecutors had challenged Lgov District Court's original decision of 23 June 2020 because of "the discrepancy between the court's conclusions, outlined in the ruling, and the actual circumstances [of the case] established during the hearing". He added that Christensen "repeatedly violated the established routine [of the labour camp]" and had been punished for this.

### ***Saratov Jehovah's Witnesses: Four early release applications denied, one still awaiting hearing***

Konstantin Viktorovich Bazhenov (born 10 May 1975) was convicted alongside [five other Jehovah's Witnesses in Saratov in September 2019](#). They were the first Jehovah's Witnesses to be imprisoned after the 2017 Supreme Court ban on Jehovah's Witness activity.

All six received prison terms ranging from two to three and half years. After unsuccessful appeals at Saratov Regional Court on 20 December 2019, prison authorities sent five of the men to Orenburg's Labour Camp No. 1. Prison guards [tortured the five men on arrival at the Labour Camp](#), and contrary to international law [no suspect prison guards have been arrested, investigated or put on criminal trial for torture](#).

The prison authorities sent Bazhenov to Labour Camp No. 3 in Dimitrovgrad (Ulyanovsk Region).

Interior Ministry officials [deprived Bazhenov of Russian citizenship in April 2020](#).

Bazhenov's request for early release was [unsuccessful on 28 October 2020 at Dimitrovgrad City Court](#) (Ulyanovsk Region). He appealed, also unsuccessfully, at Ulyanovsk Regional Court on 16 December 2020. He cannot now try again until June 2021, but is due to be released on 5 July. It is likely that Bazhenov will be [expelled to Ukraine on his release](#).

Both prosecutors and prison authorities opposed early release in Bazhenov's case as they claimed he had not been "reformed", but "continues to study, believe, and spread the ideology of Jehovah's Witnesses", Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Sivulsky told Forum 18.

He added that "Bazhenov has done everything he can to cooperate with the prison administration".

Forum 18 asked the administration of Labour Camp No. 3 in Dimitrovgrad on 22 January why Jehovah's Witness beliefs are grounds for refusing early release when it is the activities of legal entities which were banned, not the Jehovah's Witness religion. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day on 17 February.

The other four men - Aleksey Budenchuk, Gennady German, Aleksey Miretsky and Roman Gridasov - also unsuccessfully applied for early release from Orenburg Labour Camp No. 1 and the replacement of their remaining sentences with fines. German, Gridasov and Miretsky have been unsuccessful, while Budenchuk's hearing has been postponed to an unknown date.

Prosecutors and prison authorities also opposed early release for these Jehovah's Witnesses, presenting what Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Sivulsky stated was "fabricated evidence" that the four men had all broken prison rules. For example, they were accused of smoking in the wrong place, but Jehovah's Witnesses do not smoke at all.

On 22 January, Forum 18 asked the administration of Labour Camp No. 1 in Orenburg how the Jehovah's Witnesses broke prison regulations and why they were considered so dangerous that they should be behind bars, and on 15 February, why it had claimed in court that they had been smoking when this was forbidden by their beliefs. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day on 17 February.

A sixth Jehovah's Witness from Saratov – Feliks Makhammadiyev – was stripped of Russian citizenship in April 2020 while serving his jail term. He did not apply for early release and completed his sentence on 31 December 2020, after which Interior Ministry officials transferred him to a foreigners' detention centre. On 21 January 2021, he was expelled to Uzbekistan, despite being married to a Russian citizen and having lived in Russia since 2002.

### **Eligible soon to apply for early release**

The one Muslim reader of Nursi's works who remains imprisoned – Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev – should be eligible in April 2021 to request that the remainder of his sentence be replaced with a lesser punishment. He was first detained in April 2017. A Dagestan court sentenced him to eight years' imprisonment in May 2018.

One other imprisoned Jehovah's Witness is known to be approaching the point at which he can apply to exchange his remaining term for a lesser punishment. Sergey Gennadyevich Klimov was detained in June 2018 and sentenced to six years' imprisonment in November 2019. If he chooses to do so, he could request to be released in June 2021.

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## **Appeals fail to overturn "extremism" convictions**

***All the more than 60 Jehovah's Witnesses brought to criminal trial on "extremism"-related charges since the 2017 nationwide ban have been convicted, with several being jailed. Appeals have not overturned any convictions. In a few cases, appeal courts increased or reduced the punishment. Muslims who met to read the works of Said Nursi similarly convicted on "extremism"-related charges have also tended to be unsuccessful at appeal. Raids, house searches, criminal cases, prosecutions and convictions continue.***

Forum 18 (16.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2Np6tqV> - Over 60 Jehovah's Witnesses have gone on trial on "extremism"-related charges since the Supreme Court's 2017 ban on Jehovah's Witness activity, and all of them have been convicted. None of the convictions has been overturned on appeal.

Muslim readers of the works of Said Nursi similarly convicted on "extremism"-related charges have also tended to be unsuccessful at appeal (see below).

On 21 January 2021, in the first known instance of a sentence being increased at appeal in Russia, Ulyanovsk Regional Court lengthened Sergey Mysin's four-year suspended sentence to a four-and-a-half year suspended sentence (see below).

On 3 August 2020, Gennady Shpakovsky's six-and-a-half-year jail term was reduced to a suspended sentence of the same length. His conviction still stands and he may yet appeal further. He is now on two years' probation. During this time, he must register with the police every two weeks, abide by a curfew from 11 pm to 6 am, and cannot leave his home town of Pskov, his wife Tatyana Shpakovskaya told Forum 18 on 28 October 2020, "but this is still better than six and a half years in a correctional colony [labour camp]" (see below).

On 16 September 2020, Vladimir Alushkin's six-year prison term was shortened to four years and changed to a suspended sentence. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has criticised the arrest, detention and trial. Three other Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have had their sentences reduced on appeal (see below).

At present, only one Muslim who met with others to read Nursi's works remains imprisoned – Ilgar Aliyev. A court in Dagestan sentenced him in May 2018 to eight years eight years' imprisonment plus two years of restrictions on freedom. In July 2018 his appeal against conviction was rejected (see below).

In October 2018 a prosecution appeal seeking to jail Andrei Dedkov was rejected. Dedkov, a Muslim who met with others to study Nursi's works, was in June 2018 fined more than six months' average local wages, and prosecutor's appealed against the fine for its "excessive leniency". Dedkov did not challenge his conviction (see below).

On 25 January 2021, a North Caucasus appeal court upheld the acquittal of Yury Zalipayev, the first time a Jehovah's Witness has been found not guilty on "extremism"-related charges in over three years. Investigators in the town of Maysky have searched the homes of Zalipayev and other Jehovah's Witnesses on several occasions since May 2020. No new charges have yet been brought against Zalipayev himself (see below).

For those sentenced to imprisonment, there is also little possibility of early release. Courts have so far turned down all applications for this.

No Muslims who were jailed for meeting with others to read Nursi's works have applied for early release. Six Jehovah's Witnesses jailed on "extremism"-related charges applied for early release after serving half their jail terms, but have been unsuccessful. Prison administrations opposed the applications with what Jehovah's Witnesses describe as "fabricated evidence" of violations of prison rules. Four of the prisoners were accused of smoking in the wrong place, but Jehovah's Witnesses do not smoke. Another Jehovah's Witness held since 2018 and sentenced in 2019, and a Muslim reader of Nursi's works held since 2017 and sentenced in 2018, should both become eligible to apply for early release in summer 2021.

### ***"Extremism"-related prosecutions***

Jehovah's Witnesses in both Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea are prosecuted for continuing to meet for prayer and Bible study under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of"), or Part 2 ("Participation in") ("the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity"). Some are also charged under one or both of Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing of extremist activity"), or Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation").

Muslims who meet to study the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi face

similar "extremism"-related criminal prosecutions and jailings. In the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory of Crimea similar prosecutions and jailings are brought by Russian authorities against Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses.

### ***Raids, trials, convictions continue***

Raids, house searches, and criminal cases against Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses continue across Russia, and raids in Moscow in November 2020 included torture of those raided.

The most recent known raids were on 28 January 2021 in the Tyva Republic (where the FSB security service searched at least four homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Kyzyl and detained one man), and on 10 February in Moscow and Moscow Region (where at least 14 searches took place and two people have been detained).

The most recent known convictions for Jehovah's Witnesses for continuing to meet for prayer and Bible study are:

- 20 January, Yevgeny Anatolyevich Golik, suspended sentence of two and a half years, Birobidzhan District Court, Jewish Autonomous Region;
- 21 January, Anastasiya Nikolayevna Sychyova, suspended sentence of two years, Obluchye District Court, Jewish Autonomous Region;
- 26 January, Galina Vasilyevna Parkova, suspended sentence of two years and three months, Lenin District Court, Rostov-on-Don;
- 2 February, Artur Sergeyeovich Lokhvitsky, suspended sentence of two and a half years, Birobidzhan District Court, Jewish Autonomous Region;
- 10 February, Aleksandr Yevgenyevich Ivshin, seven and a half years' imprisonment, Abinsk District Court, Krasnodar Region; this is the longest jail term, yet received by a Jehovah's Witness and was imposed after only three court hearings;
- 12 February, Igor Olegovich Tsaryov, suspended sentence of two and a half years, Birobidzhan District Court, Jewish Autonomous Region;
- 12 February, Larisa Aleksandrovna Artamonova, fine of 10,000 Roubles, Birobidzhan District Court, Jewish Autonomous Region;
- 15 February, Svetlana Yakovlevna Monis, fine of 10,000 Roubles, Birobidzhan District Court, Jewish Autonomous Region;
- 16 February, Yuliya Fyodorovna Kaganovich, fine of 10,000 Roubles, Birobidzhan District Court, Jewish Autonomous Region.

The oldest person to be convicted so far is Vera Ivanovna Zolotova (born 20 October 1946), a Jehovah's Witness from Yelizovo (Primorye Region). She received a two-year suspended sentence on 25 September 2020.

Jehovah's Witness Yury Prokopyevich Savelyev (born 1 January 1954), who was sentenced to six years' imprisonment on 16 December 2020 in Novosibirsk, is the oldest person to get a jail term.

In January 2021, the oldest Jehovah's Witness to be prosecuted – Rimma Mikhailovna Vashchenko (born 17 August 1930) – died before her case could be heard in court. Investigators in Nevinnomyssk (Stavropol Region) had named her as a suspect under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity").

### ***Suspended sentences, Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists"***

Receiving a suspended sentence means a convicted person must live under restrictions specified by the judge, regularly register with probation authorities, and avoid conviction for any other offence during the probationary period or risk being sent to prison.

People under investigation or facing charges are normally added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", and individuals can also be added after being sentenced. Banks must freeze the accounts of individuals on the List, although small transactions (up to 10,000 Roubles) are permitted. Being added to the List leads to a variety of problems in everyday life, e.g. being unable to receive salaries, pensions, or benefits, renew insurance policies, or even purchase a phone SIM card.

### ***Most appeals unsuccessful***

Out of 20 cases (involving 44 people) flowing from the nationwide ban on Jehovah's Witnesses, and which had gone to appeal by 8 February 2021, two were sent for re-examination and judges reduced sentences in four cases. Courts upheld the remaining 14 guilty verdicts.

Prosecutors may also challenge sentences they think are too lenient. Their challenges rarely succeed, but in one Jehovah's Witness case a punishment was increased.

Between June 2017 and July 2018, six Muslim men were jailed by courts (in Dagestan, Novosibirsk, and Amur Region) for periods of between two and eight years for meeting together to study Nursi's works. All were convicted under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of"), or Part 2 ("Participation in") ("the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity"). Five appealed, but none was successful.

Typically, such Muslims meet in homes to study Islam, with one or more expounding on Nursi's works. They also pray, eat, and drink tea together, and do not seek state permission to meet.

At present, only one Muslim who met with others to read Nursi's works remains imprisoned – Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev (born 16 February 1977). A court in Dagestan sentenced him in May 2018 to eight years' imprisonment plus two years of restrictions on freedom for alleged involvement in "Nurdzhular", an organisation Muslims deny exists.

On 25 July 2018, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Dagestan rejected his appeal.

On 19 June 2017, Yevgeny Lvovich Kim (born 5 October 1974) was jailed for three years, nine months in Blagoveshchensk for meeting with other Muslims to study theologian Nursi's works.

He appealed against the conviction. On 24 August, at Amur Regional Court, Judge Yury Melnichenko upheld the conviction and labour camp sentence, but overturned the restrictions on freedom which were to have been imposed for a year after Kim's release.

Kim was released on 10 April 2019, but Interior Ministry officials had stripped him of his Russian citizenship and made him stateless in January 2019. Kim himself was unaware of this until the day before his release. He is still held in a detention centre for foreign nationals and stateless persons after being ordered deported. Multiple court appeals have failed, and Kim's request for documentation which would allow him to leave Russia legally for a third country has gone unanswered.

## ***Sentence increased***

In the first known instance of a sentence being increased at appeal in Russia, Ulyanovsk Regional Court lengthened Sergey Aleksandrovich Mysin's (born 21 June 1965) four-year suspended sentence to four-and-a-half years on 21 January 2021. The Regional Court reversed the first-instance court's decision to reduce his charge from Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 to Part 2.

Zasviyazhsky District Court in Ulyanovsk imposed Mysin's original four-year sentence on 8 October 2020. At the sentencing stage, the Judge reclassified the charge he faced from Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of") to Part 2 ("Participation in") ("the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity").

The District Court found the original charge of "Organisation" (Part 1) to be unproven, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Yaroslav Sivulsky explained to Forum 18 on 12 February. It then decided to convict Mysin under Part 2 ("Participation") as he did not deny that he was a Jehovah's Witness and had taken part in meetings for worship. The Regional Court "did not agree with this conclusion and decided that Mysin was the organiser", Sivulsky added.

Mysin was also given 10 months of restrictions on freedoms in October 2020, despite serious health concerns.

Mysin had been discharged early from intensive care in October 2019 after FSB security service officers went to the hospital to insist on his treatment being stopped. Ulyanovsk Region FSB refused to answer any questions from Forum 18 on the incident.

Five other Jehovah's Witnesses, including Mysin's wife Natalya, were also in October 2020 convicted and sentenced alongside him. The five received suspended sentences of two-and-a-half to three years. Ulyanovsk Regional Court upheld these on appeal in January 2021.

All six also had property confiscated before the sentences, and were in May 2019 added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists".

## ***Jail sentence changed to suspended sentence***

On 9 June 2020, Pskov Regional Court sentenced Gennady Valerianovich Shpakovsky (born 6 October 1958) to six and a half years' imprisonment. Prosecutors claimed two jars of small donations Shpakovsky had were to finance building a "world theocratic state".

On 3 August 2020, Pskov Regional Court reduced Shpakovsky's six-and-a-half-year jail term to a suspended sentence of the same length. He was released from detention the same day, but his conviction still stands and he may yet appeal further, his lawyer Arli Chimirov told Forum 18 on 29 October 2020.

Shpakovsky is now on two years' probation. During this time, he must register with the police every two weeks, abide by a curfew from 11 pm to 6 am, and cannot leave Pskov, his wife Tatyana Shpakovskaya told Forum 18 on 28 October 2020, "but this is still better than six and a half years in a correctional colony [labour camp]"

She added that they were "very surprised" at the appeal verdict. "We didn't expect such

a turn of events! The judge explained that it was because there was no reason to isolate Gennady from society."

At the time of Shpakovsky's sentencing, this was the second-longest jail term yet on "extremism"-related charges for meeting with others to pray and study beliefs. Muslim Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev had received an eight-year prison term under the same Criminal Code charges on 28 May 2018 (see above).

On 10 February 2021, Abinsk District Court (Krasnodar Region) sentenced Jehovah's Witness Aleksandr Yevgenyevich Ivshin to seven and a half years, also under Part 1. The sentence has not yet entered legal force.

### ***Penza sentence reduced for one defendant out of six***

Jehovah's Witness Vladimir Aleksandrovich Alushkin (born 30 June 1964), originally sentenced to six years' imprisonment, received a four-year suspended sentence on appeal, after nine months of competing legal challenges and pandemic-related delay.

Penza's Lenin District Court convicted Alushkin and five other Jehovah's Witnesses on 13 December 2019. The other defendants (including Alushkin's wife Tatyana) all received two-year suspended sentences, which have not been changed.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has criticised the arrest, detention, and trial. In an Opinion ([A/HRC/WGAD/2019/34](#)) released in August 2019, the Working Group concluded that he "should not have been arrested and held in pre-trial detention, and no trial of Mr. Alushkin should take place".

On 25 March 2020, Penza Regional Court overturned the December 2019 ruling, the first time this had happened in a Jehovah's Witness criminal case, and sent the case back for re-examination.

The re-trial at Lenin District Court was paused on 14 May 2020 because of restrictions on court functions during the coronavirus pandemic – while these proceedings were suspended, prosecutors succeeded in having Penza Regional Court's decision overturned at the 1st Cassational Court in Saratov on 9 July 2020. The six defendants had to return to Penza Regional Court for a re-consideration of their initial appeal (while the district court re-trial was dropped).

On 16 September 2020, the Regional Court shortened and suspended Alushkin's prison term to four years, but upheld his and the others' original convictions.

According to the written verdict, seen by Forum 18, the appeal judges decided to reduce Alushkin's sentence to less than the minimum under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 because the first-instance court had not taken into account "the concrete circumstances of his offence" or his personal situation (never convicted before, positive character references, ill health), "which, taken together, significantly lessen the degree of public danger".

Three other Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have had their sentences reduced on appeal:

- Valery Vasilyevich Moskalenko (born 15 April 1967) received an assigned labour sentence of two years and two months on 2 September 2019, on 5 November changed to a 500,000 Rouble fine waived because of time spent in detention;
- Mikhail Yuryevich Popov (born 25 May 1962) was fined 350,000 Roubles and Yelena

Vyacheslavovna Popova (born 10 September 1963) 300,000 Roubles on 14 February 2020. Both had been arrested in July 2018 and their trial started in September 2019. On 19 May 2020, their fines were reduced on appeal from a joint total of 650,000 Roubles to a joint 500,000 Rouble fine.

### ***Prosecution appeal to turn fine into jailing failed***

In June 2018, Andrei Nikolayevich Dedkov (born 16 June 1979) was fined more than six months' average local wages. Dedkov himself did not challenge his conviction.

Prosecutors appealed against the fine for its "excessive leniency". They wanted Dedkov, a Muslim who met with others to study Nursi's works, to be jailed for five years. On 2 October 2018, Krasnoyarsk Regional Court rejected the prosecution's appeal.

### ***Prosecution appeal against acquittal fails – acquittal enters into legal force***

The first acquittal of a Jehovah's Witness on "extremism" charges in more than three years entered legal force on 25 January 2021, when the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkariya refused to uphold the prosecution's appeal in the case of Yury Viktorovich Zalipayev (born 8 October 1962). Prosecutors had requested a sentence of two years' imprisonment.

On 7 October 2020, Maysky District Court had found Zalipayev not guilty of "Public calls for extremist activity" under Criminal Code Article 280, Part 1.

Zalipayev's case, in which he was accused under Criminal Code Article 280, Part 1 of "public calls for extremist activity", started in August 2016 before the 2017 ban on Jehovah's Witness activities.

The Republic's Supreme Court had to postpone the appeal hearing several times in November and December 2020 as Zalipayev and his family had developed coronavirus symptoms. They had become unwell after they had spent 12 November "in the corridors and offices of law enforcement agencies" after a search of their home, Jehovah's Witnesses stated on 27 November 2020.

Investigators in the town of Maysky have searched the homes of Zalipayev and other Jehovah's Witnesses on several occasions since May 2020. No new charges have yet been brought against Zalipayev himself, but investigators have opened two new criminal cases under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ("Participation in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity"), Zalipayev's lawyer Anton Omelchenko told Forum 18 on 3 February 2021.

Nobody has yet been charged, but "nobody except the investigators knows what has been done and what will be done next", Omelchenko added. "People have been searched, their belongings confiscated. Some things have been returned. And still it is quiet."

### ***Defendants facing second prosecution***

After their first criminal convictions, some Jehovah's Witnesses have been charged for a second time for a more serious alleged "crime".

Darya Igorevna Dulova (born 10 March 2000), her mother Venera Nikolayevna Dulova (born 3 January 1961), and Aleksandr Vitalyevich Pryanikov (born 18 May 1987) were all charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in the activity of a social

or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity").

On 27 January 2020, Karpinsk City Court handed all three suspended sentences of between one year and two and a half years.

All three appealed, and on 6 August 2020, Sverdlovsk Regional Court ruled that their case should be re-examined. The re-trial is taking place at Karpinsk City Court, with their next hearing due to take place on 16 February 2021.

In February 2020, while their appeal was still pending, the Dulovas and Pryanikov became subjects of another criminal investigation under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment, or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation").

Shortly after the appeal hearing in August 2020, investigators also charged Pryanikov under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 and Article 150, Part 4 ("Involving a minor in a criminal group or in the commission of a serious or especially serious offence"). The latter charge relates to the children of fellow Jehovah's Witness Svetlana Sergeyevna Zalyayeva (born 12 May 1975) and Zalyayeva's husband Ruslan Garaftinovich Zalyayev (born 25 October 1972). Ruslan is not a Jehovah's Witness but is still accused of participating in their activities. Investigators have also charged the Zalyayevs under Criminal Code Article 150, Part 4.

As part of the same case, investigators have also charged Pryanikov's wife Anastasiya Olegovna Pryanikova (born 5 March 1987) and the Zalyayevs under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 and Article 282.2, Part 2.

It is unknown when this case will reach court.

This is the first time that Jehovah's Witnesses have been prosecuted under Criminal Code Article 150, Part 4 since the convictions of four people in the Black Sea port of Taganrog, firstly in July 2014, and secondly, after a re-trial in November 2015. Those defendants and other Jehovah's Witnesses had also been charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2 for "continuing the activities of a banned extremist organisation" after the liquidation as an "extremist organisation" of the Taganrog Jehovah's Witness community in September 2009.

Stanislav Viktorovich Kim (born 5 July 1968) and Nikolay Yuryevich Polevodov (born 10 February 1970), from Khabarovsk, were also the subjects of two overlapping criminal cases under different charges. They received two-year suspended sentences under Article 282.2, Part 2 in February 2020, while simultaneously being tried at a different court under Article 282.2, Part 1.

This second trial ended on 3 August 2020 when Judge Vera Pismennaya of Khabarovsk's Industrial District Court sent the case (which also involved four other Jehovah's Witnesses) back to prosecutors because of a lack of detail in the investigation. The prosecution unsuccessfully challenged this decision on 12 October 2020 at Khabarovsk Regional Court; the case has not yet been re-submitted, according to the district court website.

### **Current appeals**

Four Jehovah's Witnesses have appeals against their criminal convictions underway:

- Valeriya Aleksandrovna Rayman, Sergey Alekseyevich Rayman – convicted on 9 October 2020 and given the longest suspended sentences yet of seven and eight years respectively; first appeal hearing on 26 January 2021, next due on 25 February 2021;
- Ruslan Ramizovich Alyyev – convicted on 17 December 2020 and given suspended sentence of two years and six months; appeal registered at Rostov Regional Court on 26 January 2021 – first hearing due on 15 February 2021;
- Semyon Olegovich Baybak – convicted on 21 December 2020 and given suspended sentence of three years and six months; appeal registered at Rostov Regional Court on 2 February 2021 – first hearing due on 1 March 2021.

### **Unsuccessful appeals**

Unsuccessful appeals in December 2020 and January 2021 include:

- Khasan Abduvaitovich Kogut – convicted on 10 September 2020 and given suspended sentence of 2 years and 6 months by Beryozovsky City Court; appeal unsuccessful at Kemerovo Regional Court on 23 December 2020
- Sergey Mikhailovich Ledenyov – convicted on 24 November 2020 and given suspended sentence of 2 years by Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky City Court; unsuccessful appeal on 19 January 2021 at Kamchatka Regional Court;
- Sergey Alekseyevich Britvin and Vadim Anatolyevich Levchuk – convicted on 2 September 2020 and sentenced to 4 years' imprisonment by Beryozovsky City Court, Kemerovo Region; unsuccessful appeal on 19 January 2021 at Kemerovo Regional Court;
- Anatoly Mikhailovich Tokarev (Article 282.2, Part 1) – convicted on 23 October 2020 and fined 500,000 Roubles by October District Court, Kirov; unsuccessful appeal on 14 January 2021, Kirov Regional Court.

## **Russia plays up ties to Syrian Christians**

***Russia declares its support for the Orthodox Christian militias fighting alongside the Syrian regime, as it shows great interest in the ideological factor within its expansion and domination strategy in Syria***

Al-Monitor (16.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3pAON95> - ALEPPO, Syria — The Russian forces operating in Syria honored Feb. 9 two commanders of the National Defense Forces, affiliated with the Syrian regime forces, in the cities of Mahrada and Suqaylabiyah in Hama countryside, and awarded them the [Medal of Fidelity](#) to Russia.

The honoring [statement](#), which was published on Facebook by the National Defense Forces in Suqaylabiyah, stated that due to the successful implementation of special missions and a personal contribution to strengthening combat cooperation, the commander of the Russian ground forces, Gen. Dimitri Glushenkov, awarded the Second Class Loyalty Medal to Russia to the commander of the National Defense Forces in Suqaylabiyah, Nabel al-Abdulla.

Also, the Russian general paid tribute to the commander of the National Defense Forces in Mahrada, [Simon al-Wakil](#), the Syrian army's Brig. Gen. [Saleh al-Abdallah](#) and the

member of parliament of the Syrian regime leading the National Defense Forces in the city of Salamiyah in Hama countryside, [Fadel Warda](#).

The ceremony came after the priest of the Russian Khmeimim military base in Latakia [visited Suqaylabiyah](#) Feb. 5 and inspected the construction works at the [Hagia Sophia Church](#), whose [foundation stone](#) was laid on [Sept. 5, 2020](#). The [priest was received](#) by Abdulla.

On Jan. 28, Wakil and Abdulla participated in the [inauguration of a monument](#) commemorating Prince [Alexander Nevsky](#) during their visit to the [Khmeimim base](#).

Russian army leaders have repeatedly visited the cities of Mahrada and [Suqaylabiyah](#) to hold meetings with the commanders of the [National Defense Forces](#) in the two cities and take part in official events. On Oct. 19, 2019, Abdulla [visited Moscow](#) to participate in the Fifth World Christian Conference in Russia.

Wakil, who is [close to Russia](#), is from the predominantly [Christian](#) city of Mahrada. He established National Defense Forces groups there in 2013 to [fight alongside](#) the regime forces against the [Free Syrian Army](#) (FSA).

He also received the Russian [Peace Medal](#) on Jan. 17 and the [Kremlin Medal](#) on Oct. 21, 2020, as his fighters participated in the battles of the northern and western countryside of Hama and Idlib.

Abdulla also enjoys [strong ties](#) with the Russian forces, as he leads an entire militia of [Christian fighters](#). He also participated in the [fighting](#) alongside the regime [against the FSA](#), and he enjoys [wide popularity](#) in Suqaylabiyah.

On July 26, 2020, Abdullah suggested the idea to build a [replica of the Hagia Sophia](#) in Syria during a meeting with a delegation from the Reconciliation Center at the Russian Khmeimim base.

According to RIA Novosti news agency, Vitaly Milonov, deputy of the Russian State Duma, said on July 17, 2020, "Orthodox Christians in Russia can [help Syria build](#) a replica of the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Suqaylabiyah."

Abdullah's decision to build the church came in [response to Turkey](#), which had converted back then the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque, 86 years after it was converted into a museum.

The Russian interest in the two Christian areas in the countryside of Hama and the armed militias raises several questions on whether Russia seeks to build ideological alliances in Syria as it did in Iran. Besides the Russian active role in the Syrian economic and military sectors, it seems the ideological factor supports the Russian efforts to expand and stay for a longer time in Syria.

Ahmed Muhammad Hamadeh, a researcher and military analyst, told Al-Monitor, "Russia is trying to garner further support for its policy in Syria, and is supporting military organizations from an ideological standpoint. This explains the religious card and the efforts to build the Hagia Sophia Church with the support and blessing of the Russians. The Russians are insinuating that their battle alongside the Assad regime is sacred."

Military analyst and expert Abdulslam Abdulrzak told Al-Monitor, "Russia is trying to portray itself as the protector of Christians in Syria, as it seeks to win the allegiance of these [Christian] militias to have a strong position in the heart of Syria."

Mohamad Bukaie, a political science lecturer at opposition universities in the countryside of Aleppo, told Al-Monitor, "Russia is showing a remarkable interest in the Christian regions of Mahrada and Suqaylabiyah, and this is a continuation of the Western tradition in general, and the Russian tradition in particular, with regard to minorities in general and Christians in particular. This takes us back to the Kuchuk Kainarji Treaty of 1774, which Russia signed with the Ottoman Caliphate to have the right to sponsor the Orthodox Christian population living in the Ottoman countries."

Bukaie said, "Russia is aware that its ambition for a long-term presence in Syria requires the presence of favorable social environments. It also knows full well that Russia and Iran are competing over the Alawite component, but the Christian component is almost incontrovertible, as it is much closer to Russia. This is why it is important for Russia to portray itself as the protector of Christians — be it in Syria or Russia or before the West."

Political science researcher Bilal Sattouf, who lives in Azaz in the countryside of Aleppo, told Al-Monitor, "The ideological factor is part of the Russian strategy and is exemplified by the support of the Orthodox Church and the armed Orthodox militias, as evidenced by the intensive visits and the building of a miniature version of the Hagia Sophia Church in Suqaylabiyah."

This Russian trend can be explained based on two factors, the first one being related to the competition with the Iranian Shiite ideology in Syria, the religious factor being a top factor used to extend influence, and the second is related to breathing new life into the Russian role as a protector of the Eastern Orthodox Christians.

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## **2 and 6 years in prison for Valentina Baranovskaya (69) and her son Roman Baranovskiy (46)**

HRWF (25.02.2021) - On 24 February, a Russian court convicted Valentina Baranovskaya (69) and her son Roman Baranovskiy (46), both Jehovah's Witnesses) and sentenced them to two and six years in prison respectively. Valentina, who will be 70 in April, is the first female to be convicted and imprisoned in Russia since the 2017 Russian Supreme Court ruling that liquidated all of the Witnesses' legal entities in Russia and Crimea.

**Jarrold Lopes, spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses,** says: "Today, Judge Elena Shcherbakova ruthlessly imprisoned a harmless, elderly woman and her son on baseless charges. The ruling was a mockery of the rule of law—both international human rights law as well as Russia's constitution, which protects religious freedom. Numerous international human rights actors have decried Russia's discriminatory assault of the Witnesses, which has been reminiscent of Soviet repression. Nevertheless, Russian authorities across the Federation have persisted in imprisoning and at times beating peaceful Jehovah's Witnesses practicing their Christian beliefs. We hope that Jehovah's Witnesses will one day be allowed to freely read the Bible and worship in Russia as they do in over 200 other lands."

**Rachel Denber, Human Rights Watch's deputy director of the Europe and Central Asia Division,** says: "This is a disgraceful miscarriage of justice. No one should face criminal charges, let alone an active prison sentence, for peaceful involvement in religious activities. Valentina Baranovskaya and her son, Roman Baranovskiy, have done nothing wrong, and they should be immediately freed. Russia's authorities should stop the campaign of persecution against Jehovah's Witnesses."

### **Case History**

- April 10, 2019, armed law enforcement raided Valentina and Roman's home along with three homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Abakan
- Officers confiscated Bibles, electronic devices, and personal records
- Hearings began July 8, 2020, at Abakan City Court (Judge, Elena Shcherbakova; State Prosecutor, Svetlana Shestakova)
- Valentina was diagnosed with a stroke July 20. Hearings subsequently postponed
- December 14, hearings resumed. Prosecutor cross examines religious scholar, Nikolai Stepanovich Volkov. Volkov describes the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses: "They preach, naturally, the Gospel. [...] As a matter of fact, their preaching—there is nothing illegal. [...] Morally, these are ordinary, deeply decent people."

### **Nationwide Persecution in Russia and Crimea**

- **199** criminal cases, involving **440** believers
- **52** in prison (the most since 2017 Supreme Court ruling)
- **27** under house arrest
- **1,327** homes of Witnesses raided since the 2017 Supreme Court ruling that liquidated the Witnesses' legal entities
- **39** men and women were convicted in 2020 under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (more than double the 18 convictions in 2019)
- **72** were imprisoned temporarily or due to conviction in 2020

Source: Office of Public Information, World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses

Photo : Valentina and Roman Baranovskiy – Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia website

## **Bagavudin Omarov sentenced to three years in prison and released**

HRWF (25.02.2021) - On 20 February 2021, the Kirovsky District Court of Makhachkala (Dagestan) sentenced Bagavudin Omarov to three years in prison and one year of restricted freedom.

He was found guilty under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (organizing the activities of an extremist organization) for allegedly creating a cell of the At-Takfir wal-Hijra organization banned by the Supreme Court in Russia in 2010.

The court took into account the time that Omarov had already spent in custody and released him in the courtroom.

At a court hearing on 5 February, Omarov had pleaded guilty but claimed afterwards that he had incriminated himself under the threat of torture.

In his last word, he said: "As a Muslim, I professed my religion and did not realize that somehow I was breaking the law. I regret what I have done and ask you not to deprive me of my freedom, since I have a dependent family, including small children."

According to the Human Rights Centre (HRC) "Memorial", Omarov was unfoundedly accused of involvement in the "At-Takfir wal-Hijra", a radical Muslim group created in Egypt in the 1970s, when he was arrested along with ten other suspects in November 2018.

According to Memorial, the criminal case contained no objective evidence of the existence of a cell of this organization. He and other Muslims were reading and discussing books together when they were arrested. The 'participants' in the meeting had no plans and no contacts with the alleged international organization.

### Further reading

<https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/extremism/counter-extremism/2021/02/d43723/>

<https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/53754/>

<https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/52269/>

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## A Jehovah's Witness sentenced to 7 years 1/2 at the age of 63 years

JW World Headquarters (10.02.2021) – On 10 February, a Russian court imposed the longest, harshest sentence—7.5 years in prison—against one of Jehovah's Witnesses, 63-year-old **Aleksandr Ivshin**. Prior to today's ruling, 6 years was the longest sentence imposed on one of Jehovah's Witnesses since the 2017 Russian Supreme Court ruling that liquidated all of the Witnesses' legal entities in Russia and Crimea.

Additionally, early this morning, Russian authorities armed with machine guns raided at least 15 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in the city of Moscow and its surrounding region. At least three men have been detained.

### *Ivshin Case History*

- April 2020, authorities in the villages of Kholmskaya and Pavlovskaya, Krasnodar Territory, searched 9 homes of believers, including that of Aleksandr Ivshin
- Aleksandr spent 9 months under recognizance not to leave
- December 2020, the case went to court, lasting only 4 sessions under Judge Kholoshin
- Aleksandr stated during his final comments to the court: "I get the feeling that I am being tried not for extremism, but for simply continuing to profess the peaceful religion of Jehovah's Witnesses." He continued: "In my last word I want to assure you once again that throughout my life, I have not shown aggression or hatred towards anyone. People turned to me for advice and help, and this made me happy. [...] Dear court, my position in life is based on biblical principles, where there is no extremism and violence."

### **Update on Dennis Christensen**

- Today the Kursk Regional Court denied Dennis' request for early release and to replace the remainder of his prison term with a fine. This is the second time his request for parole has been denied
- Dennis was the first Jehovah's Witness to be imprisoned following the 2017 ban
- Imprisoned since May 2017
- Currently serving a six-year sentence

### **Nationwide Persecution (Russia and Crimea)**

- **197** criminal cases, involving **435** believers
- **42** in prison
- **27** under house arrest
- **1,296** homes of Witnesses raided since the 2017 Supreme Court ruling that liquidated the Witnesses' legal entities
- **39** men and women were convicted in 2020 under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (more than double the 18 convictions in 2019)
- **72** were imprisoned temporarily or due to conviction in 2020

Photo : jw-Russia.org - Alexander Ivshin just before his conviction.

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## **Special Bimonthly FORB (01-15.02.2021)**

### **15.02.21 - Two of Jehovah's Witnesses detained in Moscow after February 10 raids 10 sent to detention center on the street of Verkhniye Polya**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/7.html>

On 12 February 2021, Dmitry Zozulya, Judge of the Savelovsky district court of Moscow, sent the peaceful believers Aleksander Serebryakov and Yuriy Temirbulatov to jail for two months, until 10 April 2021. The men will be kept in Detention Center #7.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **14.02.21 - Russian crackdown on 'extremist' Jehovah's Witnesses snares 90-year-old former teacher**

The Christian group is being subjected to a brutal campaign that has seen believers punished for 'offences' such as discussing the Bible

[Continue reading...](#)

### **12.02.21 - Russian Jehovah's Witness handed longest 'extremism' prison sentence**

On January 28, 2021 the FSB conducted searches on believers in Kyzyl, the capital of the Tyva Republic. 41 year-old Anatoliy Senin was detained and placed in the temporary detention center. It became known that a criminal case was opened against him under an

"extremist" article. In the next two days the court will decide on the question of a believer's preventive measure.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **12.02.21 - Record sentence in mounting persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and occupied Crimea**

A Russian court has passed a 7.5 year sentence against 63-year-old pensioner **Alexander Ivshin** for reading and discussing the Bible with friends. This marks a new record in modern Russia's persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses and comes just months after a new escalation in repression against believers in occupied Crimea.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **12.02.21 - The verdict has been announced for the 66th Jehovah's Witness. In Birobidzhan, the court sentenced Larisa Artamonova to a fine for her faith in God**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/6.html>

On February 12, 2021, Judge Vladimir Mikhalev of the Birobidzhan District Court found Larisa Artamonova guilty under Part 2, Article 282.2 of the RF Criminal Code (participation in extremist activities). With reference to Article 64 of the Criminal Code, the court sentenced her to a fine of 10,000 rubles (\$135) with payment in installments for 4 months.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **11.02.2021 - Two Jehovah's Witnesses are detained in Moscow and a criminal case for practicing their faith is initiated. Some believers are reporting beatings**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/4.html>

After a wave of searches that took place in Moscow and the Moscow region on February 10, 2021, 43-year-old Aleksandr Serebryakov and 43-year-old Yuriy Temirbulatov were detained. On February 12, 2021, the Savelovsky District Court of Moscow is scheduled to select a deterrence measure for the two men.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **10.02.21 - An unprecedentedly harsh sentence for a 63-year-old witness from the village of Kholmskaya: a seven-and-a-half year imprisonment for practicing faith**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/3.html>

On February 10, 2021, Aleksandr Kholoshin, judge of the Abinsk district court of Krasnodar region, pronounced the sentence on Aleksandr Ivshin, who was accused by local law enforcement officials of organizing the activities of a banned organization (part 1 of article 282.2 of the RF Criminal Code). The believer was taken into custody in the courtroom. He will be kept in pre-trial detention until the sentence is enforced.

[Continue reading...](#)

**02.02.21 - A Birobidzhan court handed a sentence for believing in God. Artur Lokhvitskiy received a two-and-a-half-year suspended sentence**

Link to full text in Russian : <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/2.html>

On February 2, 2021, Olga Klyuchikova, judge of the Birobidzhan district court of the Jewish Autonomous Region, sentenced 35-year-old Artur Lokhvitskiy to 2 years and 6 months in prison conditionally with a 3-year probation period and the obligation to report to the police once a month. The sentence has not come into force.

[Continue reading...](#)

**01.02.21 - A Khakassia prosecutor requests a record-breaking eight-year prison sentence for Roman Baranovskiy for practicing his faith and a five-year sentence for his mother**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/02/1.html>

On February 1, 2021, during a debate in the Abakan City Court, the prosecutor asked to sentence 46-year-old Roman Baranovsky to 8 years in prison and a year of restraint of freedom. For his 69-year-old mother, Valentina Baranovskaya, who suffered a stroke, the prosecutor requested 5 years in prison with the same restriction.

[Continue reading...](#)

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## **The policy of expelling 'extremists and terrorists'**

***After serving sentences as "extremists" for meeting to study and worship, three former prisoners of conscience face expulsion. One was deported, one may be expelled later in 2021, and one remains in detention as he is now stateless and no country has agreed to take him. "I think that the authorities – that is, de facto, the security services – perceive this measure not as an additional punishment, but as a way to get rid of the problem," says Aleksandr Verkhovsky.***

By Victoria Arnold,

Forum 18 (29.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3pghEPL> - Three people – two Jehovah's Witnesses and one Muslim - convicted as "extremists" for exercising their freedom of religion and belief have also suffered the deprivation of their Russian citizenship and the prospect of being forced to leave their homes. After already serving prison sentences for meeting to study their beliefs and for worship, one has been deported, one may be expelled later in 2021, and one remains in detention as he is now stateless and no country has yet agreed to take him in.

Jehovah's Witness Feliks Makhammadiyev was deported to Uzbekistan on 21 January, despite living in Russia since 2002. "We've tried to look at Feliks' expulsion from Russia

without negative emotions," Yevgeniya Lagunova, Makhammadiyev's wife, commented to Forum 18 on 22 January. "Of course, it hurts, parting with family, with everything familiar in the country. I was born here, Feliks has spent most of his life here, here we started a family."

Another Jehovah's Witness, Konstantin Bazhenov, is likely to be deported to Ukraine later this year when his prison sentence is over (see below).

Bazhenov and Makhammadiyev, who were convicted together in Saratov in September 2019, were among the first Jehovah's Witnesses to be imprisoned after the 2017 Supreme Court ban on Jehovah's Witness activity. Interior Ministry officials deprived both men of Russian citizenship in April 2020.

Forum 18 asked Interior Ministry officials in Orenburg and Ulyanovsk Regions (responsible for overseeing Makhammadiyev's and Bazhenov's deportations) why the men were being expelled from the country they consider their home because of the authorities' attitude to their religion. Forum 18 has received no response to this question (see below).

Muslim Yevgeny Kim, who similarly lost his Russian citizenship after his conviction for studying the works of theologian Said Nursi, remains in limbo in a detention centre for foreign nationals nearly two years after completing his prison sentence. Kim, who was rendered stateless, was ordered deported to his birthplace of Uzbekistan – but Uzbekistan has refused to accept him as he has never held citizenship there. Multiple court appeals have failed, and Kim's request for documentation which would allow him to leave Russia legally for a third country has gone unanswered (see below).

Both Makhammadiyev and Kim were tortured, but contrary to binding international human rights obligations none of the suspect torturers have been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture (see below).

### **"The policy of expelling 'extremists and terrorists'"**

"The policy of expelling 'extremists and terrorists' by depriving them of their previously acquired citizenship was laid down in [the Yarovaya package \[of anti-terrorism legislation in 2016\]](#). Then, thanks to the strongest resistance, it was possible to remove this norm as anti-constitutional in essence," Aleksandr Verkhovsky of the Moscow-based SOVA Center for Information and Analysis told Forum 18 on 28 January.

The mechanism became law, however, with [amendments to the Citizenship Law](#) in 2017.

"I think that the authorities – that is, de facto, the security services – perceive this measure not as an additional punishment, but as a way to get rid of the problem," Verkhovsky commented to Forum 18, adding that it is "undoubtedly" a federal-level measure. "There are not many people to whom this norm applies, but they will keep getting caught up in it, and in most cases they will be successfully expelled."

### **Continuing raids, prosecutions, jailings**

The authorities carried out [at least 86 house searches](#) – usually involving armed officials – between late October and mid-December 2020 across 16 regions of Russia. Raids, investigations, and criminal prosecutions continue against Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims suspected of carrying on the activities of banned "extremist" organisations, with [some raids including torture](#).

The most recent known raids on Jehovah's Witness homes were in Tambov Region in late December 2020, and in the Udmurt Republic on 21 January 2021. Three Muslims who [met with others to study Islam with the writings of Said Nursi are known to be under criminal investigation in Tatarstan and Dagestan](#).

Eight Jehovah's Witnesses and one Muslim Nursi reader are [serving labour camp terms](#) as "extremists".

Many other Jehovah's Witnesses are currently serving suspended sentences. Three have been convicted since the start of 2021. Receiving a suspended sentence means a convicted person must live under restrictions specified by the judge, regularly register with probation authorities, and avoid conviction for any other offence during the probationary period or risk being sent to prison.

### **Deprivation of citizenship: one Jehovah's Witness expelled**

Feliks Khasanovich Makhammadiyev (born 14 December 1984) is now free after a total of 844 days behind bars – but has been deported to Uzbekistan, where he has not lived since 2002. He arrived in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent by train in the evening of 21 January 2021, having been accompanied by police to the Russian border with Kazakhstan. His wife, Yevgeniya Lagunova (a Russian citizen), had travelled ahead by plane to meet him.

Uzbekistan is a [serious violator of freedom of religion and belief](#) and other human rights.

Makhammadiyev, like Konstantin Bazhenov, was [among the first Jehovah's Witnesses to be jailed after the 2017 Supreme Court ban on Jehovah's Witness activity](#).

Makhammadiyev was [convicted on 19 September 2019 at Lenin District Court in Saratov](#) alongside five fellow Jehovah's Witnesses. They all received prison terms ranging from two to three and half years. After unsuccessful appeals at Saratov Regional Court on 20 December 2019, prison authorities sent five of the men to Orenburg's Labour Camp No. 1, and Konstantin Viktorovich Bazhenov (see below) to Labour Camp No. 3 in Dimitrovgrad (Ulyanovsk Region).

### **Impunity for torturers continues**

Prison guards [tortured Makhammadiyev and four other Jehovah's Witnesses from Saratov](#) when they arrived at Orenburg's Labour Camp No. 1 in February 2020. As a direct result Makhammadiyev had to undergo surgery and had a drain inserted to drain fluid from his lung. Tests showed that he also suffered a broken rib and a damaged kidney. Both the Federal Prison Service (FSIN) and the Orenburg Regional Prison Service told Forum 18 that no torture took place, the latter stating that "One of the convicts was injured through his own negligence".

Against binding international human rights obligations, [no officials suspected of the torture of Muslim Yevgeny Kim and the four Jehovah's Witnesses have been arrested](#) or put on criminal trial for torture. Such impunity for officials who torture [continues](#).

Orenburg Deputy Regional Prosecutor Andrey Vyazikov told Forum 18 [on 26 February 2020](#) that "on the basis of information received about the injuries of one of the inmates, a prosecutorial review has been organised", after which prosecutors would determine whether "unlawful methods of physical pressure" had been used against prisoners.

The local Investigative Committee refused on 30 December 2020 to open a criminal case against the suspect torturers of the five Jehovah's Witnesses, a spokesperson for

Orenburg Region Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 on 12 January 2021. Orenburg's Central District Prosecutor's Office overturned the December decision on 11 January 2021, but no final decision on prosecution has yet been made.

### **Stripped of Russian citizenship**

Feliks Makhammadiyev was born on the territory of Uzbekistan when it was part of the Soviet Union, and, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, moved to Saratov in Russia with his mother in 2002, when he was still a minor.

Makhammadiyev renounced Uzbek citizenship in 2008, when he became a Russian citizen. Russian law requires anyone applying for Russian citizenship to attest that they will give up any other citizenship they hold. This does not appear to be strictly enforced.

The processing of such renunciation on the Uzbek side can be long and complicated, however, and requires ultimate approval from the President. It appears that this was never concluded in Makhammadiyev's case, meaning that he has not become stateless. Uzbekistan has therefore accepted him as a national.

Interior Ministry officials in Saratov Region [stripped Makhammadiyev of his Russian citizenship in April 2020](#), as a direct consequence of his conviction for continuing to meet for prayer and Bible study after the ban on Jehovah's Witness activity.

On 30 September 2020 at Saratov's Kirov District Court, Jehovah's Witness lawyers unsuccessfully sought to have the actions of the Saratov Region branch of the Interior Ministry (as the agency which granted and annulled Makhammadiyev's citizenship) ruled unlawful and its decision overturned. An unsuccessful appeal took place at Saratov Regional Court on 13 November 2020.

### **"A new stage of trials of separation and uncertainty"**

On 31 December 2020, Makhammadiyev was released from Orenburg's Labour Camp No. 1 on completion of his sentence (3 years, reduced by time spent in pre-trial custody). He was taken to a temporary detention centre for foreign nationals and stateless persons in the village of Alabaytal, over 100 kilometres (60 miles) away.

"At the [labour camp] exit, they were waiting for Feliks," his wife Yevgeniya Lagunova told Forum 18 on 22 January 2021. "As well as police officers, there were representatives of the security services. They allowed Feliks to talk to me for a few minutes. When I was allowed to approach Feliks, he and I were as if in a dream. We hugged, asked each other quickly 'How are you?', then the happy moment of meeting ended, and there began a new stage of trials of separation and uncertainty."

The Department for Migration Issues at the Orenburg Region branch of the Interior Ministry set an internal deadline of 20 January for deporting Makhammadiyev, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Yaroslav Sivulsky told Forum 18 on 15 January.

Uzbekistan's consulate in Kazan issued a certificate of return on the grounds that Makhammadiyev was still considered an Uzbek national. He is now beginning the process of obtaining a new Uzbek passport and documents, his wife told Forum 18 on 22 January.

### **"Of course, it hurts, parting with family, with everything familiar in the country"**

Makhammadiyev is prohibited from re-entering Russia for eight years, until 2028, his wife told Forum 18. Forum 18 wrote to the Orenburg Region Interior Ministry before the start of the working day of 20 January 2021 to ask whether Makhammadiyev would be permitted to visit Russia and whether there is any way for him to regain permission to

live in the country. Aleksey Ovsyannikov, head of the information and public relations department, replied on 27 January that he could not answer these questions because of the Federal Law on Personal Data.

"We tried to look at Feliks' expulsion from Russia without negative emotions," Yevgeniya Lagunova commented to Forum 18. "Of course, it hurts, parting with family, with everything familiar in the country. I was born here, Feliks has spent most of his life here, here we started a family."

### **Deprivation of citizenship: another Jehovah's Witness to be expelled this summer?**

Officials also stripped Konstantin Viktorovich Bazhenov (born 10 May 1975) [of his Russian citizenship in April 2020](#), as a direct consequence of his [September 2019 conviction for organising meetings for prayer and Bible study](#) after the ban on Jehovah's Witness activity.

Bazhenov received the longest sentence of the six defendants from Saratov – three and half years' imprisonment. Taking into account time spent in detention during the investigation and trial and before the verdict came into force, he is due to be released on 5 July 2021.

Bazhenov was born in Novgorod in northern European Russia, and moved as a child to Donetsk, in south-eastern Ukraine, when both Ukraine and Russia were part of the Soviet Union. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he took Ukrainian citizenship. In 2009, he returned to Russia and acquired Russian citizenship, as did his wife, Irina Bazhenova (who is from Ukraine). He did not give up his Ukrainian citizenship to do so.

On 23 September 2020 at October District Court in Belgorod, Jehovah's Witness lawyers unsuccessfully sought to have the actions of the Belgorod Region branch of the Interior Ministry (as the agency which granted and annulled Bazhenov's citizenship) ruled unlawful and its decision overturned. They challenged the ruling, also unsuccessfully, on 7 November 2020 at Belgorod Regional Court.

Bazhenov does not have a valid Ukrainian passport, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Yaroslav Sivulsky told Forum 18 on 15 January 2021. Like Makhammadiyev, Bazhenov is therefore likely to be sent to a detention centre for foreign nationals before his deportation to Ukraine. If this happens, Sivulsky added, Jehovah's Witness lawyers will file an appeal against his detention.

Forum 18 wrote to the Ulyanovsk Region branch of the Interior Ministry on 19 January to ask whether Bazhenov will be detained upon release, whether there is any way he can legally stay in Russia as a Ukrainian citizen, and why he may be expelled from the country he considers his home because of the authorities' attitude to his faith. Forum 18 had received no reply as of 29 January.

No other Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have been deprived of citizenship.

### **Deprivation of citizenship: Muslim still in detention nearly two years after sentence ended**

Yevgeny Lvovich Kim (born 5 October 1974) was sentenced in June 2017 to [three years and nine months' imprisonment for organising meetings to study Islam](#) with the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi.

Between Kim's arrest in December 2015 and his transfer to a labour camp in August 2017, he was detained in Investigation Prison No. 1 in Blagoveshchensk. While there, he was tortured in "the so-called 'press hut', a special room where the necessary testimonies are beaten out [of inmates] by other detainees who are colluding with the prison administration", a fellow Muslim told Forum 18 in October 2017.

Against binding international human rights obligations, no officials accused of torture of individuals detained for exercising freedom of religion or belief have been arrested or put on criminal trial for torture. Officials continue to torture with impunity, most recently during November 2020 raids on Jehovah's Witness homes in Moscow.

Kim was released on 10 April 2019, but Interior Ministry officials in Sverdlovsk Region (where Kim received his Russian passport in 2005) had stripped him of his Russian citizenship and made him stateless in January 2019. Kim himself was unaware of this until the day before his release.

On the day he completed his prison term he was fined and ordered deported to Uzbekistan, his country of birth. The official reason for his deportation was that he did not have the correct documents – which officials had confiscated the day before the court decision.

This appears to have been the first time anyone was stripped of citizenship after being convicted under Russia's "anti-extremism" laws for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Verkhovsky of the SOVA Center notes that Kim's case is confirmation that there is a national policy of depriving certain convicts of their Russian nationality: "If it were the local authorities deciding the issue, they would hardly be satisfied with such a solution, in fact, as his being kept indefinitely in the detention centre for foreign nationals, with accompanying lawsuits. But they are carrying out a common directive from above."

Kim remains in a detention centre for foreign nationals and stateless persons in Khabarovsk, more than a year and nine months after he was ordered deported to his birthplace of Uzbekistan, a country whose citizenship he has never held and which has therefore refused to accept him.

According to the Khabarovsk Regional Court appeal verdict of 29 September 2020, Kim's lawyer Lyubov Tatarets (who has represented him in all Khabarovsk legal proceedings) has approached several countries to ask if they would allow Kim to travel there. Like Uzbekistan, South Korea refused to accept Kim (who is of ethnic Korean heritage). Ukraine, where he lived for some time, did not reply to Tatarets. The Turkish Foreign Ministry has recommended that Kim personally submit a request for legal status in Turkey.

Because Kim is stateless, there is technically no country to which he can be deported, and so his deportation, as ordered by Khabarovsk's Railway District Court in April 2019, cannot be carried out.

### **ECtHR and Russian Constitutional Court rulings on stateless persons**

In July 2014, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg ruled that Russia had violated the human rights of detained stateless persons under the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms by: the maintenance of inhuman conditions of detention; extended detention without the prospect of expulsion; and by denying detainees the right to appeal. The ECtHR ruled

that Russia must ensure that these violations do not occur again and that it must ensure court oversight of the detention of stateless persons.

Citing the ECtHR judgment, on 23 May 2017 Russia's Constitutional Court found that two Administrative Code articles, including Article 31.9 ("Time limit on fulfilment of an administrative sentence"), were unconstitutional. It directed the Duma, the lower chamber of parliament, to "amend the Administrative Code so that it ensures reasonable judicial control over the timeframes of the detention of stateless persons subject to forced expulsion in specialised institutions". This has not happened.

### **No reply to requests for documents recognising statelessness**

On 5 December 2019, Kim's lawyer Tatarets wrote to the Department for Migration Issues at the Khabarovsk Region branch of the Interior Ministry, requesting that Kim be formally recognised as a stateless person (litso bez grazhdanstva). On 11 June 2020, Kim also wrote to the Department for Migration Issues with the same request. He also asked to be given identity documents enabling him to leave Russia voluntarily for Turkey.

Neither lawyer Tatarets nor Kim has received a reply.

The Khabarovsk Region branch of the Interior Ministry has not replied to Forum 18's questions sent on 20 January asking why Kim has not yet been given papers to leave Russia, and what his situation will be in April.

### **Deadlock**

The written verdict, seen by Forum 18, from Kim's unsuccessful appeal to Khabarovsk Regional Court (decided on 29 September 2020 - see below) states that the Khabarovsk Region branch of the Interior Ministry appealed to the Main Administration for Migration Issues at the federal Interior Ministry for guidance shortly after Uzbekistan's 29 July 2019 refusal to accept Kim.

The federal Interior Ministry's reply of 29 January 2020, seen by Forum 18, recommends that Kim should attempt both to have his sudimost (legal status as a convicted person) annulled by a court, and to have the (administrative) deportation order lifted.

Kim, his lawyers, and even Khabarovsk Region bailiffs have tried various legal means to break the deadlock, so far without success – though two appeals are pending.

*– Direct appeal against Administrative Code Article 18.8 Part 1.1 conviction*

Kim also appealed directly against his April 2019 conviction under Administrative Code Article 18.8, Part 1.1 ("Violation by a foreign citizen or stateless person of the residence regime of the Russian Federation, taking the form of the absence of documents confirming the right to residence in the Russian Federation"), which resulted in his deportation order.

His cassational appeal at the 9th Cassational Court in Vladivostok was unsuccessful on 10 June 2020. The Judge claimed that Kim had had from 29 January 2019 (the date that he was stripped of his citizenship) until 9 April 2019 (the date his passport was confiscated) to challenge the decision or obtain residence papers – even though officials had not told him he had been made stateless until 9 April, the day before his release.

*- Sudimost annulment appeal*

Kim applied to Industrial District Court in Khabarovsk in an attempt to have his sudimost ([legal status as a convicted person](#)) annulled with regard to his [June 2017 conviction under Criminal Code Article 282.2 Part 1](#) (a "serious offence" with a sudimost period of six years after serving one's sentence). The sudimost associated with Criminal Code Article 282, Part 1 (a "medium-severity offence" with a sudimost period of three years) had already expired.

Criminal Code Article 282, Part 1 punishes "Actions directed at the incitement of hatred [nenavist] or enmity [vrazhda], as well as the humiliation of an individual or group of persons on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, attitude to religion, or social group". Criminal Code Article 282.2 Part 1 punishes "Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity".

Industrial District Court refused Kim's request on 28 October 2020. He appealed unsuccessfully on 29 December 2020 at Khabarovsk Regional Court. Khabarovsk Regional Court Judge Aleksandra Savvateyeva noted in her verdict of 29 September 2020 (therefore before the hearing at Industrial District Court) that, should Kim manage to have his sudimost annulled and present evidence that he would be accepted in Turkey, then he could appeal to court again to challenge his detention.

*- Bailiffs' request*

As the organisations responsible for ensuring court rulings are carried out, bailiffs' departments sometimes apply to courts in an attempt to resolve the legal limbo in which stateless persons find themselves.

On 6 May 2020 Bailiff Svetlana Fedyanina, of Khabarovsk Region Interdistrict Department of Bailiffs for the Fulfilment of Special Enforcement Proceedings, wrote to Railway District Court asking it to halt the fulfilment of the deportation order. The letter, seen by Forum 18, notes that "to deport Kim to the Republic of Uzbekistan is impossible, as he is not a citizen [of that country]", and gives as the basis for the request the 23 May 2017 Constitutional Court ruling. The bailiffs withdrew their request when Kim made his own similar appeal to the court.

On 20 August 2020, Khabarovsk Region Interdistrict Department of Bailiffs for the Fulfilment of Special Enforcement Proceedings [wrote again to Railway District Court](#) asking it to halt the fulfilment of the deportation order. The court refused.

*- 9th Cassational Court appeal: attempt to end detention, halt deportation order, and compel officials to issue documents*

On 27 October 2020, the Institute for Law and Public Policy also lodged a cassational appeal at the 9th Cassational Court in Vladivostok against lower courts' refusal to uphold an administrative suit against the Khabarovsk Region branch of the Interior Ministry. It is unknown when this appeal might be considered.

The suit challenged Kim's continued detention and requested the court to halt the deportation order and compel the Interior Ministry to issue documentation authorising Kim's presence in Russia.

Railway District Court in Khabarovsk twice rejected the suit without consideration (on 13 April and 24 August 2020), before eventually hearing and refusing it on 11 September 2020.

Kim's lawyer Lyubov Tatarets made an unsuccessful appeal at Khabarovsk Regional Court on 29 September 2020. Both the district and regional courts concluded that Kim's lack of Uzbek citizenship "does not preclude the possibility of his expulsion from the Russian Federation", and therefore "is not in itself grounds for his release from the [detention centre]."

The lower courts "simply ignored the position of the Constitutional Court" in an earlier deportation case, Aleksandr Maltsev, director of legal practice at the Moscow-based Institute for Law and Public Policy, who has taken up Kim's case, told Forum 18 on 25 January 2021.

"Let's see if the cassational court will listen to senior colleagues," Maltsev added. "It is saddening that the case has not been considered within the two-month period stipulated by law. The 9th Cassational Court has requested the file from Khabarovsk for examination; the decision [to consider the appeal] has not yet been made."

#### *– Constitutional Court appeal*

On 10 November 2020, the Institute for Law and Public Policy lodged an appeal on Kim's behalf at Russia's Constitutional Court. The appeal questioned the constitutionality of Administrative Code Article 18.8, Part 1.1 ("Violation by a foreign citizen or stateless person of the residence regime of the Russian Federation, expressed in the absence of documents confirming the right to reside in the Russian Federation") and Article 3.10, Part 5, which gives judges the right to detain people before deportation but does not impose any time limit.

Immediately after he was released from prison on 10 April 2019, Kim was taken to court under Article 18.8 Part 1.1, fined 3000 Roubles, and ordered to be detained until he could be expelled from the country.

Expulsion (administrativnoye vydvoreniye) is technically different from deportation (deportatsiya), as it is punishment for an administrative offence imposed by a court ruling. Deportatsiya is decided on by the migration authorities or the FSB security service's border service. The two concepts also differ procedurally.

The Constitutional Court is currently checking that Kim's appeal conforms to technical requirements [prinyatiye k proizvodstvu]. "This does not guarantee that it will be admitted for consideration on its merits [prinyatiye k rassmotreniyu]", Aleksandr Maltsev of the Institute for Law and Public Policy told Forum 18. "If the judge shares our opinion on the presence of serious constitutional-legal problems in Yevgeny's case, then the appeal will be admitted."

Maltsev added that, in 2020, the Constitutional Court considered 59 appeals (55 from citizens and four at the request of courts), but refused to admit a further 3,321 for consideration.

#### *– European Court of Human Rights*

Kim lodged an appeal against his original criminal prosecution (at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg in February 2018 (Application No. 8301/18). The ECtHR has not yet decided whether the case is admissible. What will happen to Kim in April 2021?

Administrative Code Article 31.9 ("Time limit on fulfilment of an administrative sentence") – which, as noted above, has been found to be unconstitutional - places a time limit of two years on the execution of administrative punishments. Because Kim is

stateless, there is technically no country to which he can be deported, and so his punishment as decided by Khabarovsk's Railway District Court in April 2019 cannot at present be fulfilled.

It remains unknown what will happen on 30 April 2021, two years after the expulsion order entered legal force.

There is no actual limit of two years on holding people in a detention centre for foreign nationals and stateless persons, Aleksandr Maltsev of the Institute for Law and Public Policy noted to Forum 18.

"Previous experience with such cases indicates that stateless persons [litsa bez grazhdanstva] are kept in detention centres even beyond the limits of the two-year period. There are still no certified stateless persons in Russia, therefore the law does not give a clear answer to [the question of] what will happen to Yevgeny. There is even the possibility that he will get out after two years and they will detain him immediately (since he will still not have documents), take him to court, and send him again to the detention centre. Legislation gives law enforcement agents that possibility."

Khabarovsk Regional Court Judge Aleksandra Savvateyeva noted in her ruling of 29 September 2020 that the length of detention for people sentenced to expulsion "is determined by the time necessary to achieve enforcement of the decision .. as a result of which these persons, as a general rule, can be held in special institutions until their actual crossing of the state border".

Attempting to cross the Russian border in either direction without documents is a criminal offence under Criminal Code Article 322, Part 1. This carries a fine of up to 200,000 Roubles, an assigned labour sentence of up to two years, or up to two years' imprisonment.

Forum 18 wrote to the press office of the Khabarovsk Region Bailiff Service and the Interdistrict Department of Bailiffs for the Fulfilment of Special Enforcement Proceedings before the start of the working day of 20 January, asking what will happen to Kim in April 2021 if he has not been deported by then. The press office replied on 21 January that only direct parties to enforcement proceedings (or their official representatives) have the right to such information.

Kim's detention centre address is:

680003, Khabarovskiy kray  
g. Khabarovsk  
ul. Repina 3  
Tsentr vremennogo sodержaniya inostrannikh grazhdan

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## **Special Bimonthly FORB (17-31.01.2021)**

### **29.01.21 - RUSSIA: "The policy of expelling 'extremists and terrorists'"**

After serving sentences as "extremists" for meeting to study and worship, three former prisoners of conscience face expulsion. One was deported, one may be expelled later in 2021, and one remains in detention as he is now stateless and no country has agreed to take him. "I think that the authorities – that is, de facto, the security services – perceive this measure not as an additional punishment, but as a way to get rid of the problem," says Aleksandr Verkhovsky.

[Continue reading...](#)

**29.01.21 - The Republic of Tyva became the 61st region of Russia where Jehovah's Witnesses are persecuted.**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/01/7.html>

On January 28, 2021 the FSB conducted searches on believers in Kyzyl, the capital of the Tyva Republic. 41 year-old Anatoliy Senin was detained and placed in the temporary detention center. It became known that a criminal case was opened against him under an "extremist" article. In the next two days the court will decide on the question of a believer's preventive measure.

[Continue reading...](#)

**26.01.21 - A sentence for discussing the Bible has been imposed in Rostov-on-Don. Galina Parkova received a two-year-three-month suspended sentence**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/01/6.html>

On January 26, 2021, judge of the Leninsky District Court of Rostov-on-Don, Snezhana Fedorova, sentenced Galina Parkova to 2 years and 3 months on probation with the same probation period. The court considered the participation of a believer in peaceful religious meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses as extremism.

[Continue reading...](#)

**26.01.2021 - Another criminal conviction of Jehovah's Witnesses woman**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.media/articles/359093/>

A court in Rostov-on-Don ruled that the Jehovah's Witness Galina Parkova is a member of an extremist organization and sentenced her to a suspended sentence of two years and three months imprisonment. The believer refused to admit herself to be guilty.

[Continue reading...](#)

**25.01.21 - Jehovah's Witness triumphs in high court over prosecution**

Link to full text in Russian : <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.media/articles/359063/>

Today the Supreme Court of Kabardino-Balkaria refused to overturn the verdict of acquittal in the case of Jehovah's Witness Yury Zalipaev, contrary to the position of the prosecutor's office. Zalipaev has been granted the right to rehabilitation.

[Continue reading...](#)

**25.01.21 - Influential church official criticizes Orthodox dissident**

Link to full text in Russian: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=76588>

The head of the synodal Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Ilarion, urged Archdeacon Andrei Kuraev to repent and cease his blasphemy against the church.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **23.01.21 - Prosecutor tries to overturn victory of Jehovah's Witness in south of Russia**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.media/articles/358950/>

The Jehovah's Witness Yury Zalipaev, whose acquittal is being appealed before the Supreme Court of Kabardino-Balkaria, declared that he did not call for extremism, which the materials of the case confirm.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **23.01.21 - A Jewish Autonomous Region court sentenced the 43-year-old nurse Anastasiya Sycheva to two years of suspended sentence for her belief in Jehovah's God**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/01/3.html>

On January 21, 2021, the judge of the Obluchensky district court of the Jewish Autonomous Region, Olga Afanasyeva, found Anastasiya Sycheva a member of a forbidden organization and sentenced her to 2 years of suspended imprisonment with a 2-year probation period and 6 months of restricted freedom.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **22.01.21 - Udmurtia law enforcement raided the homes and workplaces of believers. A married couple was detained**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/01/5.html>

On January 21, 2021, law enforcement officers conducted searches in seven homes and workplaces of Votkinsk-based Jehovah's Witnesses.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **22.01.21 - Feliks Makhammadiyev has been released. He was deported from Russia, and reconnected with his wife at the central railway station in Tashkent**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/01/4.html>

After serving three years in prison for his faith, Feliks Makhammadiyev, having been deprived of Russian citizenship because of criminal prosecution, was released in the country of his birth on January 21, 2021. His wife Yevgenia, a Russian citizen, left the Russian Federation and followed him.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **21.01.21 - Nineteen Jehovah's Witnesses on trial in Birobidzhan region**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://cutt.ly/MkaMKaN>

Verdicts were announced for Jehovah's Witnesses Evgeny Golik and Anastasia Sycheva in the Jewish autonomous oblast. This was reported to OVD-Info by the press service of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **21.01.21 - Court keeps case of "Moscow Five" Jehovah's Witnesses open**

Link to full text in Russian: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=76577>

The Presnya court of Moscow extended the period of restriction under house arrest for adherents of the movement of Jehovah's Witnesses (forbidden in the R.F.)

[Continue reading...](#)

### **20.01.21 - Yevgeniy Golik, 44, of Birobidzhan was convicted for his faith. He received a two-and-half year suspended sentence**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/01/2.html>

On January 20, 2021 Olga Klyuchikova, judge of the Birobidzhan district court of the Jewish Autonomous Region, sentenced Yevgeny Golik under part 2 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist association): 2.5 years of suspended sentence with a probation period of 3 years and restriction of freedom for 1 year.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **18.01.21 - Devotees of forbidden organization of Jehovah's witnesses to be tried in Stavropol**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://cutt.ly/5ka1UL2>

The organizers of the activity of a local division of the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses of the city of Budennovsk, which is prohibited on Russian territory, will be tried. This was reported by the press service of the Neftekumsk district court.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **18.01.2021 - Case of Jehovah's witnesses from Neftekimsk reaches court**

Link to full text in Russian : <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/extremism/counter-extremism/2021/01/d43514/>

On 13 January, the criminal case of three Jehovah's Witnesses reached the Neftekumsk district court of Stavropol territory. They are charged under part 3, article 33, part 1, article 282.2 (arranging the activity of an extremist organization) and part 3, article 33, part 1, article 282.3 (arranging the financing of extremist activity) of the Criminal Code.

[Continue reading ...](#)

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## **Special Bimonthly FORB (01-15.01.2021)**

### **16.01.2021 - Tatarstan bans books by Said Nursi, the Islamic theologian of dialogue**

Said Nursi (1878-1960) sought a modernization of Islam through Sufism, in dialogue with science and with other religions. He also inspired Fethullah Gülen, now despised by the Turkish political leadership. The incomprehensible charge of "extremism" used to ban his works. In the past he had proposed an alliance with the patriarch of Constantinople against atheism.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **15.01.21 - What are the Court sentences for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia?**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/about/faq/7.html>

Since 2017, hundreds of Russian Jehovah's Witnesses have been wrongfully accused of extremism. How many sentences have they received? How many believers have been sentenced to actual imprisonment, suspended sentences, and fines? This updatable article publishes up-to-date data on victims of religious persecution in Russia.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **15.01.21 - Jehovah's Witness loses appeal in Kirov**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://cutt.ly/1jYzFOs>

Yesterday an appeal in the case of Anatoly Tokarev was considered in Kirov oblast court.

On 14 January, the oblast court made the decision to leave in force the verdict of the court of the first instance in the case of a Jehovah's Witness (he had been sentenced to a fine of 500,000 rubles). We note here that the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is forbidden in the Russian Federation.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **14.01.21 - Anti-evangelism law enforced against Orthodox cleric**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://credo.press/235215/>

The reason for the administrative prosecution and propaganda campaign in local and federal news media against the rector of the church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in the village of Sovetka of Rostov oblast, a cleric of the Suzdal diocese of the RPATs [Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church].

[Continue reading...](#)

### **12.01.21 - The FSB in Karachay-Cherkessia tried to find facts of involvement in the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses among three residents of a mountain village**

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2021/01/1.html>

On January 9, 2021 in the village of Mednogorsky (Karachay-Cherkessia), the FSB conducted an investigation of at least three apartments of believers: A.S., 34, S.G., 42, and I.P., 55. One elderly woman who was present had high blood pressure due to stress. She required urgent medical assistance.

**Continue reading...**

### **11.01.21 - Russian parliament views exempting religious bodies from financial oversight**

Link to full text in Russian: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=76502>

The State Duma Committee on the Financial Market supported the draft bill that grants banks, insurance companies, and other organizations that work with monetary funds the right not to identify the benefactors of religious organizations, but it warns of possible risks of the use of the proposed rules by extremist organizations and its requests additional materials.

**Continue reading...**

### **07.01.21 - Moscow patriarch sees divine hand in Turkey's actions**

Link to full text in Russian: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=76492>

Patriarch of Moscow and all-Rus Kirill considers the recent transformation of the cathedral of Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) into a mosque is providential. In his opinion, it was divine punishment of Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew for intensifying the schism in Ukraine.

**Continue reading...**

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## **Misuse of anti-extremism legislation**

SOVA CENTER (19.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2XH7nkl> - Sova Center in Moscow has just published its monthly report about the misuse of the anti-extremism legislation against some religious groups.

### ***Jehovah's Witnesses***

The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses continued in December. They are being charged with involvement in the activities of banned organizations, usually based on the April 2017 ruling of the Supreme Court of Russia that recognized the Administrative Center of

Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and 395 of their local religious organizations as extremist. In some cases, Jehovah's Witnesses are prosecuted for continuing the activities of their religious organizations, which had been banned even before 2017. We believe that these bans had no legal basis, and we regard them as manifestations of religious discrimination.

In mid-December Yuri Savelyev was sentenced in Novosibirsk to six years of imprisonment under Article 282.2 Part 1 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization) for continuing the activities of the local Jehovah's Witnesses community. He has already served about half of the appointed term in pre-trial detention.

Ruslan Alyev from Rostov-on-Don received a suspended sentence of two and a half years under Article 282.2 Part 2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization).

In Sochi, Nikolai Kuzichkin was sentenced under Article 282.2 Part 1 of the Criminal Code to one year and one month of imprisonment, and Vyacheslav Popov – to a year and 10 months. Taking into consideration the time spent in pre-trial detention, the court exempted both of them from serving their sentences.

As we only learned in December, a criminal case was opened in late October under Article 282.2 Part 2 of the Criminal Code and Article 282.3 Part 1 of the Criminal Code (financing of extremism) against Andrei Okhrimchuk from Rostov-on-Don.

New criminal case under Article 282.2 Part 1.1 of the Criminal Code (recruitment into an extremist organization) was opened in Kabardino-Balkaria in late November. The suspects were Vadim Zalipaev and Maria Zalipaeva, residents of Maysky and relatives of Yuri Zalipaev, who had been acquitted the day before under Article 280 of the Criminal Code (public calls for extremist activity).

In Snezhinsk of the Chelyabinsk Region, Ilya Olenin became a suspect under Article 282.2 Part 2 of the Criminal Code.

In early December, Vladimir Melnik, Vladimir Piskarev and Artur Putintsev were sent to a pre-trial detention center under Article 282.2 Part 2 of the Criminal Code.

In the village of Kholmskaya of Krasnodar Krai, Oleg Danilov and Alexander Shcherbina became defendants in a new criminal case.

It was reported in mid-December that the criminal case under Article 282.2 Part 1 of the Criminal Code was opened in Chuvashia against seven Jehovah's Witnesses (previously we only knew about the charges against Vladimir Dutkin from Cheboksary).

Sergei Kazakov, a resident of Bikin in Khabarovsk Krai, was placed into a pre-trial detention center under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code; an unnamed woman is also a suspect in his case.

The first ever case against Jehovah's Witnesses in the Tambov Region was opened under Article 282.2 Part 1 of the Criminal Code in late December. Anton Kuzhelkov was taken into custody, and Nikolai Prokhorov remained at large.

On November 30, 2020, the Partizansky City Court of Primorsky Krai returned the case of two believers to the prosecutor; Irina Buglak and another local resident, born in 1997, whose name was not reported. Both has been charged under Article 282.2 Part 1 of the Criminal Code.

The same decision was made in Vladivostok, in the case of Dmitry Barmakin, also charged under Article 282.2 Part 1 of the Criminal Code. In September, the court returned the case of his wife Yelena to the prosecutor as well.

Meanwhile, during the trial of Vladivostok residents Valentin Osadchuk (charged under Article 282.2 Part 1 of the Criminal Code) Nadezhda Anoikina, Lyubov Galaktionova, Elena Zaischuk, Nailya Kogai, Nina Purge and Raisa Usanova (charged under Article 282.2 Part 2 of the Criminal Code) the court of appeals canceled the decision of the lower courts to return the case to the prosecutor's office, and sent the case to the court of the first instance for consideration on the merits.

## **Muslims**

It became known in December, that, in late November, the Leningrad Regional Court confirmed the verdict passed in September to Ilyasbek Toktonazarov, a citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic. He was sentenced to two years in prison under Article 282.2 Part 2 of the Criminal Code. A follower of the Tablighi Jamaat movement, Toktonazarov was charged for conducting dawah (sermon) and taelim (teaching) on the territory of a builders' camp in Kingiseppsky District. Tablighi Jamaat was banned in Russia in 2009 – in our opinion, without due justification. This religious movement is engaged in propaganda of fundamentalist Islam, but it has never been noticed in any calls for violence, and, therefore, persecution against its supporters is, in our opinion, unjustified.

As we found out in December, a court fined Radik Safiullin, Deputy Head of the Muslim Religious Association of Kostroma one thousand rubles under Article 20.29 of the Code of Administrative Offenses in early November. In September 2020, in the Kostroma mosque, he received from unidentified persons two volumes: *Excellent Explanation of 'The Criterion Between the Allies of The Merciful and the Allies of the Devil' by Ibn Taymiyyah* by Saleh bin Abdul-Aziz Al ash-Sheikh and *Ar-Raheeq Al-Makhtum (The Sealed Nectar): Biography of the Prophet* by Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri. Safiullin put his signature and seal of the Muslim Religious Association of Kostroma on the books, and also created a certificate stating that these publications were not on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. After that, according to the court findings, he handed the books over to the prayer room of Penal Colony No. 7.

In fact, however, these publications are included on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. We do not view the ban against as appropriate. It was recognized as extremist for promoting the superiority of one religion and nationality over others. However, the text of the book deals with the biography of the Prophet Muhammad and the events of Islam's formative era; it reflects the worldview characteristic of medieval Muslim religious literature on which the book is based. As for the explanation of Ibn Taymiyyah's book we had no opportunity to get acquainted with its contents.

Meanwhile, In Bardymsky District of Perm Krai, Chairman of the local Muslim religious organization Malik Muratov was fined 2,000 rubles under the same article. The charges were based on the fact that the Bardym cathedral mosque had publicly accessible copies of the books *The Ideal Muslim: The True Islamic Personality of the Muslim as defined in the Quran and Sunnah* by al-Hashimi and *The Gardens of the Righteous* by Al-Nawawi, recognized as extremist. In our opinion, Muratov was prosecuted inappropriately, since he has been charged for the distribution of two books that had been banned inappropriately. *The Ideal Muslim* is a set of ethical rules and rules of everyday life for devout Muslims, which, in our opinion, contains no signs of extremism, and *The Gardens of the Righteous* by Al-Nawawi is a classic collection of the 13th century hadiths, which should not be evaluated using the modern ideas about tolerance.

## **New restrictions in the Russian religious law: What should believers expect?**

By Olga Sibireva

ICLRS (23.12.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3nmYaI5> – In Russia, religious discrimination is often directed at new religious movements and Protestant organizations, and this trend has only intensified over the years. Increasingly strict state policies towards religious minorities are manifested, primarily, at the legislative level.

The Russian Law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations provides basic regulations for religious life. It was adopted in 1997 and has been amended almost every year since then; many of these amendments have worsened the plight of freedom of religion and belief in Russia.

At the end of 2018, new amendments aiming to impose new restrictions on freedom of religion or belief were announced by the Ministry of Justice. The draft law was officially submitted to the State Duma (the Russian Parliament) in July 2020. The authors of these new amendments claim that the draft law will strengthen Russia's fight against religious extremism. But what are these new provisions; what will they do; and why are they being criticized by both lay believers and experts?

The new amendments prohibit religious groups from having connections with persons suspected of financing terrorism, as well as foreign citizens and stateless persons, whose stay in Russia is recognized as undesirable or whose activities are considered extremist by Russian courts. These persons are prohibited from being leaders or members of religious organizations in Russia. This same ban constrains individuals whose bank accounts were frozen by the Russian Interdepartmental Commission on Countering the Financing of Terrorism. This Commission can freeze the funds of organizations and individuals about whom there is information implicating their involvement in terrorist activities, even when there is no legal ground to include them on the List of Terrorists and Extremists operated by the Federal Financing Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring).

Previously, these norms were accepted for nonprofit organizations, but the new amendments extend these norms to religious organizations. Although fighting against terrorism is itself a legitimate, compelling government interest meant to protect human rights and public safety, the inherent vagueness of these provisions may lead to arbitrary interference into the activities of religious minorities and unpopular religious groups, masked as efforts to counter terrorism.

The amendments also complicate the reporting of religious groups: currently, a religious group is required to notify the Ministry of Justice of its activities every three years. If the amendments are adopted, religious groups will be forced to do this annually.

Also, the amendments suggest that priests and employees of religious organizations who have received spiritual education abroad should pass mandatory recertification and re-education in Russia. Finally, the amendments would change the term "member" of a religious group to "participant."

The Russian Orthodox Church is the only religious organization that has supported the new draft law. Representatives of other religious organizations consider the draft law a threat to freedom of religion and its norms as an attempt of the state to strengthen its ability to interfere with the internal activities of religious organizations. Also, according to many leaders of religious minorities, the new amendments will not help in the fight

against extremism because real extremists and terrorists usually do not seek formal membership in official religious organizations.

The mandatory recertification of the persons educated abroad and the replacement of the term "member of a religious group" with "participant" have provoked the most public discussion. Religious organizations and human rights advocates see a danger in replacing the term "member of a religious group" with "participant" because believers, at least Christians, consider the concept of "church member" very important. They will continue to use this phrase even if the required word "participant" is written in the official documents of their organization or group, but this incongruity alone can create additional obstacles for exercising religious freedom, including the denial of registration for religious organizations that do not abide by such changes.

As Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky, Chairman of the Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals), noted:

The sad experience of law enforcement practice ... says that law enforcement officials will not understand the details. For them, everyone who will attend the service or even a friendly tea party, where the Bible is being discussed, are participants in religious activities. If there is a person among them who has been recognized as a member of a banned extremist organization, even if he has already served his or her sentence, then the church (or religious group) will be recognized as breaking the law.

The requirement for recertification is simply excessive. It is obvious that if religious organizations have not yet introduced such a procedure, it means that they recognize the qualifications of clergy educated outside of Russia. So, there is no reason for the state to doubt these qualifications either. For some religious organizations, it does not matter where exactly a person received spiritual education. For example, the president of the Russian Jewish Congress, Yuri Kanner, emphasized that "in Judaism, the educational institution you graduated from is not so important as the name of the rabbi who blessed you to be a rabbi."

In this situation, the state's demand for recertification and re-education of clergy constitutes interference into the internal affairs of religious organizations. The vagueness of these provisions, including the lack of rules regulating the institution which will perform recertification and the procedure of recertification, can result in the abuse of these provisions by law enforcement agencies.

Mandatory recertification also means that every foreign religious leader or priest will be required to receive confirmation of his or her education from Russian authorities, and the state will obtain broad discretion not to approve this education and, thus, prevent any undesirable priest from serving in Russia. This may result in a situation where at some point some religious organizations could have no priests at all because the main spiritual schools of their religions are located out of Russia. Buddhist organizations even sent a letter to the State Duma to explain that Russian Buddhist clergymen

have no opportunity to receive additional professional education in the Russian Federation due to the absence of religious educational organizations corresponding to their creed, registered in Russia in accordance with the Federal Law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations.

Russian lawmakers argue that mandatory recertification would protect Russian believers from extremist preachers. But as Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky notes, "underground preachers do not need any permits, certifications, etc." Damir Mukhetdinov, the First Deputy Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation,

added that supporters of radical movements “are convinced opponents of the very principle of centralizing religious activity... therefore they themselves avoid serving in established and large religious structures.” The vicar of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of the Mother of God in Moscow, Kirill Gorbunov, expressed the joint position of many religious minority groups: “The state should not interfere in the internal affairs of the education of clergy. As long as they do not violate the law, this should be left to the religions themselves.”

Even the head of the Russian Orthodox Church’s legal department, Abbess Ksenia Chernega, who is supportive of all other amendments, believes that the point about mandatory recertification should be changed. In her opinion, recertification “should be subject only to those clergymen and persons from among the religious personnel trained abroad who will begin to carry out religious and teaching activities in the country after the entry into force of the new law.”

In December 2020, the State Duma adopted the draft law in the first reading; the proposals from religious organizations seemed to have made no difference in that version and were not taken into account. Sergei Gavrilov, Chairman of the Committee on Development of Civil Society, Public and Religious Organizations, promises that the amendment on recertification of clergy will be changed for the second reading. The other amendments obviously will be approved in their current form, and the new restrictions will soon take effect.

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