

Table of Contents

- ***RUSSIA, 6 and 4 years in prison for a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest December 01-15***
- ***Six years in prison for a Jehovah's Witness from Kazan***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest November 16-31***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest November 01-15***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest October 16-31***
- ***A Jehovah's Witness deprived of his citizenship and deported to Turkmenistan***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest October 01-15***
- ***Religious persecution denounced at the OSCE by a "foreign agent"***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest September 16-30***
- ***More than 2000 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses searched in six years***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest September 01-15***
- ***Five Russian Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to 30 years in prison in all***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest August 16-31***
- ***The head of the Church of Scientology of St. Petersburg was sentenced to prison and released***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest August 01-15***
- ***Cassation confirms a 2 ½ years sentence of a Jehovah's Witness***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest July 16-31***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest July 01-15***
- ***Süleymançılar: Russia cracks down on Turkish Sufi organization***
- ***Labelling the Movement of Conscientious Objectors as "Foreign Agent"***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest June 01-15***
- ***Transformation Center Church falsely accused of supporting "Ukrainian terrorists"***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest May 15-31***
- ***The Russian human rights community will persevere***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest May 01-15***
- ***Liquidating the SOVA Center: the official end of religious freedom in Russia***
- ***Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest April 16 - 30***
- ***In March-April, 12 Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to 76 years in prison in all***
- ***A Jehovah's Witness sentenced to eight years in prison in Vladivostok***

- *In Akhtubinsk, three Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to seven years in prison each*
- *In the Kemerovo region, a Jehovah's Witness was sentenced to six years in prison*
- *A court in Moscow sentenced five Jehovah's Witnesses*
- *A Jehovah's Witness sentenced to six and a half years in Khabarovsk*
- *Six years in prison for a Jehovah's Witness in Krasnoyarsk*
- *Pastor Moskvitin's Church headed for liquidation*
- *Moscow mosque plan pits Putin allies against each other*
- *Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest April 01-15*
- *First jail term for religious-based opposition to war*
- *Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest March 16 -31*
- *Churches collect 1 billion rubles (10 million EUR) for 'people in need' in occupied territories*
- *500 religious buildings damaged and over 20 clerics murdered in Ukraine*
- *Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest March 01 -15*
- *Six years and five months of prison for a Jehovah's Witness*
- *'Court' in Russian-occupied Crimea passes long sentences against three Ukrainian Jehovah's Witnesses*
- *New legislation restricting missionary work breached the European Convention*
- *Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest Feb 16-28*
- *Russia to pay about 350,000 EUR to Jehovah's Witnesses for disrupting their religious meetings*
- *Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest Feb 01-15*
- *OCCUPIED UKRAINE: "Disappeared" clergy, seized places of worship, library purge*
- *Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest Jan 16-31*
- *Special bimonthly: religious persecution and issues – Jan 01-15*
- *RUSSIA/ FAKE NEWS CORNER: "Ukraine is a Catholic conspiracy, the Pope is a monster and a thief," a Russian Orthodox leader says*
- *РОССИЯ/УГОЛОК ФЕЙКОВЫХ НОВОСТЕЙ: «Украина это католический заговор, Папа Римский изверг и вор», заявил лидер Русской православной церкви*
- *47 Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to prison terms in 2022*
- *New records in 2022 in the campaign of persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses*

TV channel of the Russian Orthodox Church under EU sanctions

Alexander Dvorkin, member of FECRIS board of directors and former vice-president, is linked to the TV Channel SPAS of the Russian Orthodox Church under EU sanctions

Willy Fautré, Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers



The Court of Appeal of Aix-en-Provence. [Credits](#).

HRWF (30.12.2023) – On 18 December 2023, [SPAS](#) (СПАС), the official TV channel of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), was included in the [12th package of sanctions of the European Union](#) of [EU sanctions](#) as part of a separate list of “Russian media outlets which have engaged in a systematic, international campaign of disinformation, information manipulation and distortion of facts in order to enhance its strategy of destabilising both its neighbouring countries and the EU and its member states.”

To counteract this, the EU has suspended the broadcasting activities and licenses of a number of Kremlin-backed disinformation outlets.

SPAS TV Orthodox Channel under EU sanctions

In its programs, SPAS (Savior) justified the military attack on Ukraine with religious and spiritual arguments. The TV channel supports actions that violate and threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, says the Council of the European Union.

The YouTube video platform already blocked it in March 2022 together with Russian state media outlets. However, SPAS can still be viewed through its own site.

The TV channel started broadcasting in 2005 and according to the Moscow Orthodox Patriarchate is one of the 20 most important TV programs in Russia. It mainly broadcasts

documentaries, live broadcasts and church services delivered by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, close to the Kremlin and its secret services.

SPAS describes itself as "the largest Christian TV channel in the world". Its owner is the Russian Orthodox Church. The government financially supports the television program. According to the EU, the management of the channel maintains close relations with the state leadership.

Alexander Dvorkin and SPAS TV Channel in Russia & FECRIS in France

Alexander Dvorkin (Александр Дворкин), the Russian Orthodox propagandist, who is well-known for his hate-fueling speeches against Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical and Protestant Churches, Hare Krishna devotees and Scientologists both in Russia and abroad, has very close links with the SPAS TV, which has posted [dozens of videos](#) of the notorious propagandist. Until Russia's war on Ukraine, he was banned by Ukraine for being one of the voices of Russia's propaganda.

Until 2023, Dvorkin was still a member of the board of directors of FECRIS (European Federation of Research and Information Centres on Sectarianism), an anti-cult organization based in France and funded by public money. Until 2021, he was even the vice-president of FECRIS.

In a bailiff's deed dated 10 September 2022, CAP-LC (Coordination of associations and individuals for freedom of conscience), which defends freedom of religion or belief throughout the world, summoned FECRIS to appear before the Marseille Magistrates' Court, seeking to have the organization dissolved for what it claimed are its illegal activities.

CAP-LC, which has ECOSOC status at the UN, points out that it was founded to defend peaceful religious minorities and new religions, which FECRIS has repeatedly stigmatized for numerous years as dangerous, harmful and totalitarian "cults."

The request for dissolution of FECRIS is based on its dissemination of discriminatory and defamatory statements in 2006, 2009 as well as at conferences in 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2021 against a number of law-abiding minority religious and belief movements. CAP-LC also denounces the misuse of public subsidies received by FECRIS from the French Prime Minister.

Each of the accusations of CAP-LC was supported by concrete evidence, twenty-seven documents in all filed with the Court of Appeal of Aix-en-Provence.

On 12 December 2023, the Court of Appeal of Aix-en-Provence confirmed a previous judgment forcing FECRIS, despite its attempts to escape court proceedings, to defend itself against a request of dissolution filed by the French association with ECOSOC status at the UN.

About EU sanctions against Patriarch Kirill vetoed by Orban in 2022

On 7 April 2022, the European Parliament adopted a [Resolution](#) in which it condemned the role of Patriarch Kirill in providing theological cover for Russia's aggression on Ukraine.

In the same year, 26 EU member states decided to impose sanctions on the head of the church, Patriarch Kirill but President of Hungary Viktor Orban vetoed the imposition of EU sanctions on him.

In July 2022, the French association *CAP Liberté de Conscience* and [Human Rights Without Frontiers \(Brussels\)](#), which filed a documented complaint against Patriarch Kirill with the ICC (International Criminal Court), made a joint statement at the 50th Session of the UN Human Rights Council to share their deep concerns about the grave responsibility of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia in the outbreak and extension of Russia's war on Ukraine.

The possible prosecution of Patriarch Kirill falls within Article 25 of the Rome Statute which provides that *"a person shall be criminally responsible and liable for punishment for a crime within the jurisdiction of the Court if that person for the purpose of facilitating the commission of such a crime, **aids, abets or otherwise assists** in its commission or its attempted commission."*

At a lower level, Alexander Dvorkin should be put on a further EU sanctions list as a banned person in Ukraine and a propagandist of the pro-war Russian Orthodox Church.

6 and 4 years in prison for a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses

127 Jehovah's Witnesses are currently serving prison terms for practicing their faith in private

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

[The European Times](#) (27.12.2023) - On 18 December 2023, the judge of the Novosibirsk District Court, Oleg Karpets, sentenced Marina Chaplykina to 4 years in prison, and Valeriy Maletskov to 6 years in prison for organizing religious meetings in private homes. They were taken into custody in the courtroom. They do not admit their guilt and can appeal the verdict.

In April 2019, FSB investigator Selyunin opened a criminal case against them, accusing them of extremism. On the same day, searches were carried out at a total of 12 addresses. In one case, the planting of banned literature [was seen](#). Valeriy Maletskov, who lives with his wife and a young child, was invaded by the armed security forces, breaking down the front door. He was accused of organizing the activities of an extremist organization, and Marina Chaplykina was accused of participating in it and financing it. The man was placed under house arrest, and the woman was placed under recognizance agreement.

After three years of investigation, the case was submitted to the Novosibirsk District Court. The accusation was based on recordings of conversations with believers made by a secret witness "Ivan", who attended services of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The couple was among [8 Jehovah's Witnesses](#) persecuted for their faith in the Novosibirsk region. Aleksandr Seredkin, whose case was divided into separate proceedings from the case of Maletskov and Chaplykina, is serving 6 years in a penal colony. People belonging to other faiths are also serving long prison terms for the practice of their faith: 6 Protestants – 6 Muslims (Said Nursi followers) – 5 Muslims (Faizrahman) – 2 Greek Catholic – Orthodox (2) – Shaman (1)

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest December 01-15

15.12.2023 - Believers were searched in Vladivostok. One was beaten, the other was arrested

JW - On December 7, 2023, searches were carried out in Vladivostok at at least five addresses of believers, including the home of an elderly man. A believer, 19, was detained and placed in a pre-trial detention center for 2 months, while another man was beaten by security forces.

Demanding to give the password from the phone, the man was hit several times with a rubber truncheon. Later, he went to the emergency room, where he was diagnosed with a bruise of internal organs. He needs treatment.

During interrogation by the Investigative Committee, believers were asked questions about their religious beliefs, as well as about their participation in Jehovah's Witnesses worship services. They were also required to incriminate co-religionists.

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14.12.2023 - In Crimea, a case has been opened against an imam for "illegal missionary"

Sova - On December 13, 2023, a search was conducted in the house of Imam Ismail Yurdamov from the village of Juma Eli (Privetnoye) in the Kirov region of Crimea. A case was initiated against the imam under Part 4 of Art. 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation (carrying out missionary activities in violation of the requirements of legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations).

The search was carried out by employees of the Center for Combating Extremism of the local Ministry of Internal Affairs.

According to Yurdamov's daughter Gulsum, the reason for the persecution of the imam was that he actively supports Crimean political prisoners.

12.12.2023 - In St. Petersburg, the Awakening of Nations Church was fined for collaborating with an undesirable organization

Sova - On December 4, 2023, the Kalininsky District Court of St. Petersburg fined the local religious organization Church of Evangelical Christians "Awakening Nations" for cooperation with an undesirable organization (Article 20.33 of the Administrative Code).

The audit established that in August 2023 the church took part in the activities of the international religious organization "Transformation Center Church International (TCCI), Transformation Center Covenant Network TCCN USA", included in the list of non-governmental organizations whose activities are recognized as undesirable in territory of the Russian Federation.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.12.2023 - The Investigative Committee inspects the activities of the Muslim prayer house in Korolev

Sova - On December 10, 2023, it became known that the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation began checking the activities of a religious organization of Muslims in Korolev, near Moscow.

Local residents were outraged by the activities of the prayer house, located on the territory of a sawmill. The townspeople are dissatisfied with the large number of migrants coming to the house of worship and believe that the organization operates illegally on the territory of the plant.

[Continue reading...](#)

11.12.2023 - In Neryungri, the building of Jehovah's Witnesses has been converted into the property of the Russian Federation

Sova - On December 11, 2023, it became known that the building of Jehovah's Witnesses in Neryungri had been transferred into state ownership.

Shortly before the decision to recognize the central and local organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses as extremist, the building of the Kingdom Hall in Neryungri was donated to the religious organization Jehovah's Witnesses in Austria. In November 2023, the court declared the donation agreement invalid.

08.12.2023 - The Moscow City Court approved the sentence for the followers of Said Nursi

Sova - Six defendants in the case were found guilty of involvement in the banned association "Nurcular". The verdict came into force.

As it became known on December 8, 2023, on November 8, the Moscow City Court approved the sentence passed in the summer against six followers of Said Nursi. The defendants will have to serve different terms of imprisonment in a colony.

The verdict in the case of involvement in the Nurcular association, recognized as an extremist organization, was handed down on June 27, 2023 by the Kuzminsky District Court of Moscow. The accused **Evgeny Tarasov** under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization) was sentenced to six and a half years in a general regime colony with a four-year ban on the leadership of religious organizations and participation in them.

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08.12.2023 - Aleksey Gerasimov, one of Jehovah's Witnesses from Kazan, sentenced to six years in prison for talking about the Bible

JW- On December 7, 2023, the consideration of the criminal case against one of Jehovah's Witnesses **Aleksey Gerasimov** was completed in the Kirovsky District Court of Kazan. Judge Anna Kryuchenkova sentenced the believer to 6 years of imprisonment for reading the Bible with friends. He is taken into custody in the courtroom.

In September 2022, law enforcement officers accused the believer of organizing the activities of an extremist organization (Part 1 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). The decision to initiate a criminal case stated that unidentified

persons "involved individual residents of Kazan" in religious activities, "gave lectures and showed videos promoting the ideas of the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses." The investigation was conducted by the investigator of the Investigative Department of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Republic of Tatarstan A. A. Giniyatullin, and in January 2023 the case was transferred to the court, where it was considered for almost another year.

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08.12.2023 - Russia bans Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Catholic ministries

UCA news - Russian occupation authorities have banned the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and other Catholic ministries in occupied areas of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, according to the church's main communications office in Kyiv.

The UGCC announced on its website on Dec. 7 that it had obtained a copy of an order signed by Yevgeny Balitsky, the Kremlin-installed head of the area's military-civil administration, declaring that the UGCC had been banned and its property was to be transferred to his administration.

Also banned by the order were the Knights of Columbus and Caritas, the official humanitarian arm of the universal Catholic Church.

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05.12.2023 - A Court in Surgut ruled in a high-profile case of 18 Jehovah's Witnesses, some of whom had previously been tortured

JW - On December 5, 2023, the high-profile trial against Jehovah's Witnesses from Surgut came to an end. Dmitriy Lupin, a judge of the Surgut City Court, found 18 believers guilty of extremism and sentenced all to suspended sentences ranging from 4 to 7 years.

Sergey Loginov and Timofey Zhukov received the longest suspended sentence — 7 years. Yevgeniy Kayryak received 6 years and 10 months; Leonid Rysikov — 6 years and 9 months; Pavel Romashov — 6 years and 7 months; Vyacheslav Boronos, Saveliy Gargalyk, Artem Kim, Igor Trifonov, Yevgeniy Fedin — 6 years and 6 months; Igor Petrov — 6 years and 5 months; Vasiliy Burenescu, Sergey Volosnikov, Igor Kobotov and Viktor Fefilov — 6 years and 4 months; Aleksey Plekhov and Artur Severinchik — 6 years and 3 months.

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05.12.2023 - Debate on the case of nine Jehovah's Witnesses took place in Irkutsk

Sova - The prosecutor asks that all believers be sentenced to imprisonment. On December 4, 2023, the Oktyabrsky District Court of Irkutsk held a debate between the parties in the case of nine Jehovah's Witnesses. Eight believers were detained in Irkutsk and the region in October and December 2021, **Denis Sarazhakov** - in December of the same year in Khakassia. Everyone except 70-year-old Sergei Vasilyev, who was sent under

house arrest, was placed in a pre-trial detention center; in relation to another accused, the criminal case was separated into separate proceedings, and he was put on the federal wanted list. **Yaroslav Kalin, Sergei Kosteev, Nikolai Martynov, Mikhail Moish, Igor Popov, Denis Sarazhakov, Alexei Solnechny and Andrei Tolmachev** were charged under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization), Sergei Vasiliev - under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization).

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01.12.2023 - The court confirmed the sentence of Jehovah's Witness from Prokopyevsk

Sova - Yuri Chernykh was found guilty under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code and sentenced to forced labor.

On November 28, 2023, the Kemerovo Regional Court considered the appeal against the sentence of Jehovah's Witness Yuri Chernykh and left it unchanged. Chernykh was found guilty under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization) and was sentenced to three years of forced labor with 15% of earnings withheld. The verdict was handed down on September 28, 2023 by the Central District Court of Prokopyevsk.

[Continue reading...](#)

Six years in prison for a Jehovah's Witness from Kazan

[JW-Russia](#) (08.12.2023) - On 7 December 2023, the criminal case against Jehovah's Witness Aleksey Gerasimov was completed in the Kirovsky District Court of Kazan. Judge Anna Kryuchenkova sentenced the believer to 6 years of imprisonment for reading the Bible with friends. He was taken into custody from the courtroom.

In March 2022, searches were conducted in the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazan. Several of them, including Gerasimov, were interrogated. According to investigators, Aleksey continued to meet with fellow believers to discuss the Holy Scriptures, which the authorities considered to be undermining the foundations of the constitutional order of Russia.

In September 2022, law enforcement officers accused Gerasimov of organizing the activities of an extremist organization (Part 1 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). The decision to initiate a criminal case stated that unidentified persons "involved individual residents of Kazan" in religious activities, "gave lectures and showed videos promoting the ideas of the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses." The investigation was conducted by the investigator of the Investigative Department of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Republic of Tatarstan A. A. Giniyatullin, and in January 2023 the case was transferred to the court, where it was considered for almost another year.

In June 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation liquidated all legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses but did not factually prohibit the practice of this faith in Russia.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest November 16-31

30.11.2023 - The Cassation Court left Andrey Danielyan from Rubtsovsk in prison

JW - On November 30, 2023, the panel of judges of the Eighth Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction in Kemerovo, having considered Andrey Danielyan's complaint, finally approved the sentence of the first instance—6 years in a penal colony.

19 people who came to support Danielyan were admitted to the hearing. While the panel of judges was in the deliberation room, the audience was able to greet the believer participating in the meeting via video conferencing.

A year earlier, Judge Aleksey Bezrukov of the Rubtsovsk City Court of the Altai Territory found **Danielyan** guilty of extremism for discussing the Bible among fellow believers. And in January 2023, the Altai Regional Court approved this verdict.

[Continue reading...](#)

29.11.2023 - Fourth post-prison Jehovah's Witness deportation

Forum 18 - Despite living half his life in Russia and marriage to a Russian citizen, 46-year-old Jehovah's Witness Rustam Seidkuliyeu was deported to his native Turkmenistan in September after completing his jail term for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Officials did not explain to Forum 18 why his Russian citizenship had been annulled in 2022, given his long residence in Russia, that there were no victims in his criminal case, and that his family had had to leave Turkmenistan because of their exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

The Russian authorities have deported a fourth Jehovah's Witness after annulling his Russian citizenship and barring him from re-entering the country. Migration officials put 46-year-old Rustam Seidkuliyeu on a flight to his birthplace of Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, on the evening of 16 September, some five months after he was released from prison.

[Continue reading...](#)

29.11.2023 - Searches in the Kuril Islands. A criminal case initiated against two women for their faith

JW - On November 23, 2023, on Iturup Island security forces searched the homes of two women who profess the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. From Olga Kalinnikova, 47, and Larisa Potapova, 59, a written undertaking not to leave was taken.

A three-hour search took place in the apartment of Olga Kalinnikova, who lives with her minor daughter in the city of Kurilsk. Operational actions were led by the investigator of the Investigative Department of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Sakhalin Region K. P. Deshko. Electronic devices, various data storage devices, notebooks and personal records were seized from Kalinnikova. According to her, law enforcement officers spoke rudely about the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses.

[Continue reading...](#)

27.11.2023 - New armed terror against independent religious community in Russian-occupied Crimea

khpg.org - The Russian occupation authorities have jailed three Crimean Tatars linked with the 'Alushta' religious community which has long been under attack for its religious independence

From left Yusuf Ashirov, Villen Useinov, Zinur Appazov Photos posted by Crimean Solidarity

Three Crimean Tatars, including the Imam of the 'Alushta' Muslim Community, were jailed on 23 November after armed searches of the men's homes. The charges in each case were absurd, with one of the men jailed for ten days over a video posted on the social network VKontakte in 2013, before Russia's invasion of Crimea. This is the latest of many attacks under Russian occupation on the independent 'Alushta' Muslim Community.

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27.11.2023 - In Moscow, the case of two Muslims accused of studying the banned books of Said Nursi has been brought to court.

Sova - Zurab Dzhabrailov and Jeyhun Rustamov are accused of involvement in an extremist organization.

On November 27, 2023, the Main Investigative Directorate of the Investigative Committee for the city of Moscow announced the transfer of a criminal case to the court under the CC. 1 and 2 tbsp. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization and participating in it) against two accused.

[Continue reading...](#)

24.11.2023 - War and faith in Russia and the former Soviet Union

Pillarcatholic -More than 30 years after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, former Soviet states are still suffering the effects of the war against religion, says one of the founders of an organization formed to record testimonies of the victims of Soviet oppression. Elena Zhemkova helped found Memorial in Moscow in 1987, before the dissolution of the USSR. Over the following decades the charity collected information about more than three million victims of the Soviet regime, including those murdered, imprisoned or deported

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22.11.2023 - Searches of Jehovah's Witnesses took place in Saratov. Two believers under house arrest

JW - On November 16, 2023, searches were carried out at least at 6 addresses in Saratov. They affected at least 13 believers. **Aleksey Vasilyev**, 47, and **Aleksey Yefremov**, 59, were placed in a temporary detention facility, and a day later they were placed under house arrest.

The investigative actions were sanctioned by the Volzhsky District Court of Saratov on November 9, 2023, at the request of investigator Bulat Urazov. The raids began around 6 a. m. and lasted until an average of noon. The security forces seized electronic devices, storage media, personal records and postcards. A passport of a citizen of the Russian Federation was also seized from one of the believers.

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22.11.2023 - Appeal overturned the acquittal of Jehovah's Witnesses from Yugorsk. The Case of Sorokin and Zhukov will be re-examined

JW- On November 20, 2023, the court of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area granted the prosecutor's appeal and overturned the acquittal in the case of Ivan Sorokin and Andrey Zhukov.

In August 2023, the judge of the Yugorsk District Court of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area, Yuriy Klyupa, concluded that by professing the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, the believers did not violate the law, and acquitted their case.

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21.11.2023 - First sentence for faith was handed down in Tula. Four of Jehovah's Witnesses received suspended sentences

JW - On November 20, 2023, Nina Panarina, judge of the Proletarsky District Court of Tula, convicted four Jehovah's Witnesses: **Yevgeniy Godunov** and **Gurami Labadze** received 6 years and 6 months suspended each, Yuliya Popkova and Anzhela Putivskaya — 2 years and 6 months suspended.

The believers faced criminal prosecution for their religious beliefs in April 2021, when law enforcement officers conducted a series of searches in Tula and the neighboring city of Kireyevsk. Then they learned that the FSB Directorate for the Tula Region had opened a criminal case against them for organizing the activities of an extremist organization (Part 1 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). After searches and interrogations, Gurami Labadze was placed under house arrest.

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20.11.2023 - Police raid on the Balashikha mosque

Sova - On November 17, 2023, a police raid took place at a Muslim prayer house in Balashikha near Moscow during Friday prayers.

Armed security forces, including employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Center "E", FSB and the prosecutor's office, surrounded the building in which the house of worship is located, checked the documents of those leaving, and detained some. Some of them were put on a bus to be taken to the military registration and enlistment office.

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17.11.2023 - The Court sentenced a pensioner, Tatyana Sushilnikova, to 4 years suspended. "I'm on trial simply for worshipping to God"

JW- On November 15, 2023, the Kuznetskiy District Court finalized its hearing of the case of **Tatyana Sushilnikova**, 64, one of Jehovah's Witness from Novokuznetsk. Judge Valeriya Shipitsyna found her guilty of extremism for peaceful religious practice and sentenced her to 4 years suspended with a probation period of 3 years, as well as 10 months of restriction of liberty after serving the main sentence.

Sushilnikova faced persecution for her faith in June 2021. The armed security forces raided her and her husband Sergey in the early morning. "My husband was put on the floor like some kind of criminal, I was pressed against the wall," Tatyana recalls

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17.11.2023 - Moldova's largest Orthodox church keeps link to Russia

Reuters - Moldova's largest Orthodox church reaffirmed its link to its Russian parent church on Thursday despite dissent from priests who have denounced the association with Moscow over the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine.

More than 90 percent of Moldovans adhere to Orthodox Christianity. But parishioners are divided between two churches -- the Moldova Metropolis, subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Metropolis of Bessarabia, which reports to the Romanian church. Neither has autocephaly, or full independence.

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17.11.2023 - Speech: Over 100 religious sites have been damaged or destroyed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine

Gov.UK - Thank you, President, and thank you to our briefers.

I also thank the Russian delegation for bringing human rights issues to the Security Council. The United Kingdom has long believed in the link between human rights and matters of peace and security, and we are glad that the Russian delegation now appears to share this view. We look forward to further discussions on human rights in the Council.

The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all around the world. We condemn all persecution on the grounds of religion or belief. Ukraine shares these values. It is a pluralist and multi-faith society, with the right to freedom of religion or belief enshrined in its constitution. Its lawmakers have sought the advice of experts on freedom of religion and belief as they respond to threats to Ukraine's national security.

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Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest November 01-15

14.11.2023 - The case of Jehovah's Witnesses from Karpinsk once again returns to the Sverdlovsk Regional Court

Sova - After the Supreme Court did not approve the acquittal of three Jehovah's Witnesses, the Sverdlovsk Regional Court simply returned the case to the prosecutor. The cassation court again sent the case to the regional court.

On November 8, 2023, the Seventh Cassation Court of General Jurisdiction in Chelyabinsk overturned the ruling of the Sverdlovsk Regional Court to return to the prosecutor the criminal case of Jehovah's Witnesses Alexander Pryanikov, Venus and Daria Dulova, accused under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization), and sent the case for a new appeal hearing to the same court with a different composition.

[Continue reading...](#)

13.11.2023 - In Moscow, due to the "threat of public scandal," the presentation of a book by a priest who did not support the SVO was canceled

Sova - On November 13, 2023, the cultural center "Pokrovskiye Vorota" announced the cancellation of the presentation of the book by Archpriest Andrei Kordochkin, "The Russian Orthodox Church in Spain from the mid-18th to the beginning of the 21st century," scheduled for November 14. The reason was "threats of public scandal" from Orthodox activists.

Shortly before the expected presentation, calls appeared on the Telegram channels of some Orthodox activists to prevent the event. In particular, the Orthodox publicist Alexander Voznesensky considers it unacceptable that "in the capital of Russia some bastard in a cassock, broadcasting that "Russia is a country of fascists", that "the president is a man with the psychology of a terrorist", that the SVO is evil, makes public presentations his books and also made money from those very Russians and from that very Russia about which he so simply wipes his feet to please his cronies like Khodorkovsky .

[Continue reading...](#)

13.11.2023 - Attempted arson of a temple in New Moscow

Sova Center - On November 9, unknown persons tried to set fire to the temple in honor of the Georgian Icon of the Mother of God in the village of Marushkino in New Moscow. A temple worker, walking around the area, found traces of burning on a wooden building and two bottles with a flammable mixture nearby. Apparently, someone scared off the arsonists, since there were people in the temple during the day. The police are investigating what happened.

09.11.2023 - Residents of South Butovo oppose the construction of a mosque

JW - On November 7, 2023, it became known that residents of the Moscow district of Yuzhnoye Butovo are opposed to the construction of a mosque on Akhmat Kadyrov Street. They are asking the mayor's office to hold a vote on this issue.

Residents living near the site of the proposed construction fear that the appearance of the mosque will lead to a transport collapse. They also fear the inconvenience associated with the use of sound amplification equipment during services.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.11.2023 - Valeriy Vyaznikov, a retired miner from Primorye Territory, received a suspended sentence for believing in Jehovah God

JW- On November 7, 2023, Nina Kalashnik, judge of the Pozharskiy District Court of the Primorye Territory, found Valeriy Vyaznikov guilty of participating in extremist activities — this is how the confession of faith in Jehovah was interpreted. A peaceful 59-year-old believer from the village of Chegdomyn was sentenced to 2 years and 6 months of suspended imprisonment.

"My conscience is clear before God, people and the court. It is for the fact that I try to convey life-saving truths from God's Word that I am now being judged," the believer said in his final statement. Despite the lack of any victims and facts of extremist actions in the case, the prosecutor asked to impose a suspended sentence of 3 years with restriction of freedom for 1 year. The verdict can be appealed.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.11.2023 - Russia Hands Jehovah's Witness Follower 7-Year Jail Term for 'Extremism'

Moscow Times - A court in Russia's Chelyabinsk region has sentenced a Jehovah's Witness follower to seven years in prison on charges of "extremism," the religious organization's Russian branch said Tuesday.

Yevgeny Bushev had been under house arrest since September 2022 on allegations of "organizing actions to continue the illegal activities of a banned religious organization," the religious group said on its website.

Russia's Supreme Court in 2017 declared the Jehovah's Witness movement to be "extremist," banning its estimated 400 branches across the country. Chelyabinsk's Kalininsky District Court found Bushev guilty and handed him a seven-year prison sentence.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.11.2023 - Searches of Falun Gong followers were conducted in several regions

Sova - On November 1, 2023, police officers and the Center for Combating Extremism in several regions conducted searches in the homes of Falun Gong practitioners.

In particular, searches took place in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Irkutsk and the Irkutsk region.

According to Falun Gong, the searches in Irkutsk were preceded by an authorized picket in support of Falun Gong followers persecuted in China, during which two men present at the action invited another participant, N., to take the posters they had brought and take a photo with them in their hands.

[Continue reading...](#)

03.11.2023 - Appeal in Tatarstan upholds the verdict of three Jehovah's Witnesses

JW- On November 1, 2023, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tatarstan upheld the sentence of the first instance—2 years suspended for Tatyana Obizhestvit, 2.5 years suspended for Leysan Bochkareva and 3 years and 1 month in prison for Andrey Bochkarev, who has already served this term in full while in jail.

The prosecutor considered the decision of the court of first instance too lenient and in March 2023 filed an appeal in which he asked the court to "strengthen" the punishment for the believers, as well as to exclude mitigating circumstances from the verdict.

[Continue reading...](#)

03.11.2023 - The appeal in Yaroslavl reduced the suspended sentence of Petr Filiznov and Andrey Vyushin by 4 years

JW- On October 30, 2023, the judicial board of the Yaroslavl Regional Court commuted the sentences of Petr Filiznov and Andrey Vyushin, sentencing them to 2.5 years instead of 6.5 years suspended. For the Kuznetsovs, the suspended sentence of 2.5 years remained the same.

The basis for mitigating the sentences for Filiznov and Vyushin was that the court reclassified the charge from Part 1 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation to Part 2 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

[Continue reading...](#)

03.11.2023 - A criminal case has been opened against the perpetrator of a pogrom in a monastery in the Tula region

Sova - On November 3, 2023, it became known that a criminal case had been initiated under Part 2 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (intentional public desecration of religious or liturgical literature, objects of religious veneration, or their damage or destruction) and Part 2 of Art. 213 of the Criminal Code (hooliganism committed with the use of weapons or objects used as weapons) against a 40-year-old resident of Novomoskovsk, who staged a pogrom in the Assumption Monastery.

House arrest was chosen as a preventive measure.

Let us remember that at the end of October he smashed icon cases and overturned a lectern in the monastery church and insulted believers.

[Continue reading...](#)

02.11.2023 - Armed raid on Krasnodar Region church

Forum 18 - In early October, 10 unidentified armed men raided a non-Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church in the southern Krasnodar Region whose clergy have repeatedly spoken out against Russia's war in Ukraine. A priest was physically tortured, detained, and charged with "disobeying a police officer" and "discrediting the

Russian Armed Forces". "At least five searches took place simultaneously", Fr Iona told Forum 18. The Krasnodar Region branches of the Investigative Committee, Federal Security Service (FSB), Interior Ministry, and National Guard failed to respond to Forum 18's questions about the raid.

[Continue reading...](#)

01.11.2023 - Another Muslim house of worship sealed in Moscow

Sova - On October 31, 2023, another Muslim prayer house was sealed in Moscow, this time in the Yuzhnoye Butovo microdistrict.

We are talking about the prayer house of the Local Muslim Religious Organization "Mercy", located in the SNT "Gavrikovo-1".

According to the chairman of this organization, Imam Marat Alimov, "employees of the Investigative Committee conducted an inspection in the prayer hall of the spiritual center, seizing copies of the Koran and other religious literature for examination. After this, the building was sealed . " Let us remind you that a Muslim prayer house in the Moscow Mitino district

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest October 16-31

31.10.2023 - A Muslim house of worship has been sealed in Moscow.

Sova - On October 26, 2023, law enforcement officers sealed the premises of Muslims in the Moscow district of Mitino.

The prayer house on General Beloborodov Street was used under a lease agreement by the local religious organization of Muslims "Dawn," which is under the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation.

According to the chairman of the organization, Renat Khasyanov, the premises were sealed "after an inspection . " Khasyanov noted that "the prayer house is visited by citizens of the Russian Federation . "

30.10.2023 - Anti-Semitic actions in the North Caucasus

Sova - On October 28 and 29, 2023, a whole series of anti-Semitic protests took place in the North Caucasus. An anti-Israel rally took place in Makhachkala. In Cherkessk, protests were held demanding the expulsion of Jews from the region. In Khasavyurt, after a "people's gathering" at the hotel, Israelis were prohibited from living in the hotel. A Jewish cultural center was set on fire in Nalchik. In Makhachkala, a crowd of protesters seized the airport in search of arriving Israelis.

[Continue reading...](#)

30.10.2023 - Religious leaders commented on anti-Semitic actions in the North Caucasus

Sova Center - Religious leaders commented on the series of anti-Semitic actions that took place in the North Caucasus at the end of October 2023.

The Supreme Mufti of Dagestan, Akhmad Abdullayev, actually stood in solidarity with the pogromists, saying that he worries about the Muslims dying in Palestine and understands the indignation of the protesters, but considers their chosen path of protest against the presence of Israelis in the republic to be erroneous.

[Continue reading ...](#)

30.10.2023 - Action under anti-Semitic slogans in Moscow

Sova - On October 23, 2023, an action of solidarity with Palestine and Gaza was held in Moscow on the Yauz Gate square, at the monument to the Border Guards of the Fatherland. The rally brought together about 100 people standing with posters "Palestine, we are with you", "Hands off Jerusalem", "Freedom for Palestine". The crowd, for example, shouted "Khaybar, Khaybar al Yahud" (a reference to Muhammad's important military victory over the Jews in the settlement of Khaybar), thereby calling for armed struggle not only with Israel, but with Jews in general.

On October 21, 2023, a rally in support of Gaza was also held in Moscow near the Israeli Embassy on Bolshaya Ordynka. During the action, police detained nine activists, against whom reports of an administrative offense were drawn up for participating in an unauthorized meeting.

27.10.2023 - The State Duma adopted a law regulating the collection of donations by religious organizations

Sova - On October 18, 2023, the State Duma adopted in the third reading the law "On Amendments to Article 15-3 of the Federal Law "On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection" and Article 16 of the Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations."

The law, in particular, supplements Art. 16 of the Law "On Freedom of Conscience" with a clause regulating the collection of donations in connection with religious services. The exclusive right to collect such donations is vested only in centralized religious organizations, local organizations included in their structure, as well as persons authorized by them:

[Continue reading...](#)

26.10.2023 - The Patriarch is concerned about the possible loss of Russian identity due to the influx of migrants

Sova - On October 24, 2023, during a meeting with students of the Moscow Pedagogical State University, Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' Kirill touched upon the topic of migration. In his opinion, the massive attraction of cheap labor from abroad could lead to the loss of Russian identity.

[Continue reading...](#)

25.10.2023 - The Court sentenced the previously acquitted Aleksey Khabarov to 2.5 years in prison

JW - On October 20, 2023, the Porkhov District Court of the Pskov Region issued a verdict in the case Aleksey Khabarov, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, for the third time. This time, judge Natalia Kapustina found him guilty of extremism and sentenced him to 2 years and 6 months in a general regime colony. He was taken into custody in the courtroom.

Khabarov's accusation of extremism was based on ordinary religious activities. The believer explained: "Professing religion does not simply mean silently believing that there is a God. Jehovah's Witnesses ... study the Bible, discuss it with others, and try to live in harmony with what is written in the Bible." In his final statement, he added: "My real motive — love — is directly opposite to enmity and hatred, which means that there is no subjective side of the crime. Consequently, there is no corpus delicti as such." The believer has the right to appeal the court's decision once again.

[Continue reading...](#)

20.10.2023 - The Central Bank suspended the issue of new banknotes due to discontent among Orthodox Christians

Sova - The indignation of the Orthodox was caused by the new thousandth banknote issued by the Central Bank, on which the Orthodox Church is depicted without crosses. The Central Bank has suspended the issue of banknotes.

On October 16, 2023, the Central Bank introduced a new banknote in denomination of one thousand rubles. The reverse side of the banknote depicts the palace church in the Kazan Kremlin and the Syuyumbike tower. At the same time, the church is depicted without crosses, and the Syuyumbike tower is crowned with a crescent.

A number of Orthodox figures were outraged by this image. In particular, the Moscow region priest Pavel Ostrovsky suggested that such an image could be a "conscious provocation" of the designers.

The "Forty Forties" movement appealed to the Russian Investigative Committee and the prosecutor's office with a demand to check the activities of the creators of the new banknote for signs of inciting religious hatred.

Deputy Chairman of the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and the Media of the Moscow Patriarchate Vakhtang Kipshidze called the depiction of churches without crosses a form of blasphemy, but in the case of the new banknote "there is no problem", since the building depicted on the bill is not a church, but the Museum of the History of Statehood of the Tatar People .

Vladimir Legoyda, Chairman of the Synodal Department of the Moscow Patriarchate for Church Relations with Society and the Media, said that "the selection of images on banknotes should be approached more carefully. So as not to create tension where there may well not be any. And it simply shouldn't be . "

Some politicians shared the Orthodox outrage. For example, the chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State Building, Andrei

Klishas, believes that “placing such an image on banknotes is at the very least unreasonable and even provocative . ”

On October 18, the Bank of Russia decided to suspend the issue of the banknote, not release it into wide circulation, and modify the design.

20.10.2023 - The Court of Cassation again rejected the appeal against the verdict of Svetlana Monis from Birobidzhan.

JW- On October 18, 2023, the Ninth Court of Cassation of Vladivostok confirmed the verdict and decision of the appellate instance against Svetlana Monis, 46, — 2.5 years of suspended imprisonment.

This is the second hearing in the Ninth Court of Cassation in Vladivostok. In 2019, Monis was accused of extremism for reading the Bible together with friends, singing religious songs, and saying prayers. The court of first instance imposed a fine. The appeal toughened the sentence, but the court of cassation overturned this decision.

[Continue reading...](#)

17.10.2023 - Judicial statistics on cases of “illegal missionary” in the first half of 2023 have been published

Sova - On October 17, 2023, the Judicial Department of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation published statistical data on the application of Art. 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (violation of legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations) in the first half of 2023.

[Continue reading...](#)

16.10.2023 - Another case of “illegal missionary” against the Muslim community in Kotelniki has been dropped

Sova - On October 9, 2023, the magistrate court of judicial district No. 346 of the magistrate judge of the Lyubertsy judicial district of the Moscow region dismissed the case under Part 4 of Art. 5. 26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (carrying out missionary activities in violation of the requirements of legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations) against a local religious organization of Muslims in the city of Kotelniki due to the absence of an administrative offense in its actions.

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16.10.2023 - In Chechnya, a case was filed against a Volgograd resident accused of burning the Koran.

Sova - Nikita Zhuravel, who recorded a video of the burning of the Koran in front of a mosque, is accused of insulting religious feelings and hooliganism. Investigations into the case were carried out in Chechnya.

On September 27, 2023, the Visaitovsky District Court of Grozny received a case against Volgograd resident Nikita Zhuravel, accused under Part 2 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (public actions expressing clear disrespect for society and committed with the aim of insulting the religious feelings of believers, committed in places specially designed for worship, other religious rites and ceremonies) and Part 2 of Art. 213 of the Criminal Code (hooliganism committed by an organized group by prior conspiracy based on religious hatred and enmity).

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A Jehovah's Witness deprived of his citizenship and deported to Turkmenistan

By Willy Fautré

European Times (25.10.2023) - On September 17, 2023, employees of the Federal Migration Service, contrary to a court decision, deported Rustam Seidkuliev to Turkmenistan. Earlier, at the initiative of the FSB, his Russian citizenship was revoked due to criminal prosecution for his faith.

Seidkuliev [was sentenced](#) to two years and four months to penal colony for participating in worship services and talking about Bible topics. In total, Rustam spent a little more than a year and ten months behind bars. After Seidkuliev's [release](#) from the colony, additional punishment came into force. It was not associated with imprisonment and allowed him to live with his wife and move freely around Saratov, and to communicate with friends and to work.

Judicial proceedings

In January 2020, the Investigative Committee initiated a criminal case against Rustam Seidkuliev. He was accused of extremism for reading and discussing the Bible. Two weeks later, the police arrested him in a shopping center in Adler. He was transported to the city of Saratov and placed under house arrest for seven months. In March 2021, Seidkuliev's case came to court. Two months later he was found guilty and sentenced to two and a half years in a general regime colony. The regional court reduced this period by two months. The Court of Cassation approved this decision. Seidkuliev served his sentence in Penal Colony-33 in Saratov. During this time, the FSB accomplished the revocation of his Russian citizenship. In April 2023, he was released from the colony, and in September he was deported to Turkmenistan.

Extradition

According to Seidkuliev himself, FMS officers tried to expel him from the country twice. The first attempt was on September 15, but the flight was delayed, and the believer was returned to the detention center. "The next day, the staff came and said, 'You have 15 minutes to get ready,'" the believer recalls. "After that, they were taken to Moscow by car, explaining the rush because of the order of the authorities."

Seidkuliev arrived in Ashgabat at 3 a.m. There he was kept at border control for about 12 hours and released after paperwork was completed.

More than 20 years ago, Rustam's stepfather was deported from Turkmenistan because he was one of Jehovah's Witnesses. This is how the Seidkuliev family ended up in Saratov.

Rustam Seidkuliev became the fourth Jehovah's Witness to be deported from the country by the Russian authorities because of his religion since 2017. Previously, this happened to [Dennis Christensen](#), [Feliks Makhammadiev](#) and [Konstantin Bazhenov](#).

Recommendations

At the Warsaw Human Rights Conference earlier this month, Jehovah's Witnesses recommended that Russia

- annul the April 2017 Supreme Court decision that banned and liquidated the legal entities of the Witnesses
- release all Witnesses in detention
- remove the Witnesses' religious literature, including the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (the Holy Bible), from the Federal List of Extremist Materials
- return all confiscated property owned or used by the Witnesses
- enforce media standards prohibiting libel and slander
- abide by Russia's Constitution and respect international law, including the binding judgments of the European Court of Human Rights

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest October 01-15

15.10.2023 - Anti-war Russian clergy face punishment

Deutsche Welle - Clergy have been defrocked and fined in court for speaking out against the war in Ukraine as the Russian Orthodox Church brings members into line ideologically.

DW spoke with clergy who left Russia and others who remained — all of them trying to navigate an increasingly repressive environment inside the Orthodox Church.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Andrey, a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), faced a dilemma: Save the community he had been building in the church, or risk it all by speaking up? Stay, or leave?

Pastor Andrey was one of those who publicly condemned the war and decided to flee. He relocated his entire family to neighboring Georgia, where he cannot fulfill his pastoral mission without the ROC's approval. He chose to speak to DW from there on condition of anonymity in order to preserve his final "glimpse of hope" of again performing his priestly services in Russia someday.

[Continue reading...](#)

13.10.2023 - Three Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced in Oryol

Sova Center - On October 13, 2023, the Sovetsky District Court of Orel sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses Vladimir Piskarev, Vladimir Melnik and Artur Putintsev to six years in a general regime colony with one and a half years of restriction of freedom under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code on organizing the activities of an extremist organization.

A criminal case against Piskarev, Melnik and Putintsev was initiated on December 8, 2020. Since December 11 of the same year, they were all under arrest. 67-year-old Piskarev suffered two hypertensive crises and a stroke in a pre-trial detention center; he was diagnosed with coronary vascular disease of the brain.

[Continue reading ...](#)

12.10.2023 - An Appeal in Sevastopol upheld the verdict against three Local Jehovah's Witnesses.

JW- On October 11, 2023, the judicial board of the Sevastopol City Court upheld the sentence of **Vladimir Maladyka**, 60, **Yevgeniy Zhukov**, 53, and **Vladimir Sakada**, 52, - six years each in a general regime colony. The verdict entered into force, but can be appealed in the court of cassation.

In his appeal, the lawyer pointed out that Maladyka, Sakada and Zhukov "were convicted only because they professed beliefs based on the Bible and peacefully practiced their Christian faith." At court hearings, they did not deny that they were Jehovah's Witnesses and together with family and friends, they sang songs praising God, addressed him in prayer and discussed the Bible. At the same time, the believers explained that their goal was to profess their religion, help people, show kindness and love for others.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.10.2023 - A criminal case has been initiated against a Jehovah's Witness from Cherkessk

Sova - On October 12, 2023, the department of the Russian Investigative Committee for the Karachay-Cherkess Republic reported on a criminal case against a 55-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Cherkessk. The believer is accused according to CC. 1.1 and 2 art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (recruitment into the activities of an extremist organization and participation in it).

A resident of Cherkessk was sent under house arrest. According to investigators, from 2018 to April 2023, the accused took part in the activities of the local community of Jehovah's Witnesses: "Carrying out recruitment conversations, convincing citizens of the need to accept the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, promoting its superiority over others, organizing meetings and worship services, at which she conducted sermons and classes on studying the basics of illegal religious activities and literature."

[Continue reading...](#)

09.10.2023 - Four now jailed for refusing to fight in Ukraine on religious grounds

Forum 18 - Military courts have now jailed four men for refusing on religious grounds to go to fight in Ukraine. In Vladivostok, Baptist Vyacheslav Reznichenko entered the prison colony-settlement on 18 September to start his 2 year, 6 month term. In Murmansk, a court handed long-serving contract soldier Maksim Makushin, a Pentecostal Christian, a term of 2 years and 8 months "for refusing to kill Ukrainians". He is awaiting his appeal.

Neither courts nor prosecutors answered Forum 18's questions why they were not allowed to do alternative civilian service.

Courts have sentenced two more Russian Protestants to terms of imprisonment because they refused on religious grounds to go to fight in Ukraine. Soldiers – whether regular or mobilised – have virtually no legal means to avoid deployment to Ukraine on grounds of conscience, leaving them facing criminal charges for refusing to obey orders.

[Continue reading...](#)

06.10.2023 - A new case has been opened against a Jehovah's Witness from Voronezh in the Amur region

Sova - Evgeny Sokolov, who is being tried under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code in Voronezh, sent for a psychiatric examination as part of a new case initiated in Zeya, Amur Region.

On October 5, 2023, it became known that a new criminal case under Part 1 of Art . 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization).

The case was opened on December 15, 2022 by an investigator from the Russian FSB Directorate for the Amur Region in connection with the activities that Sokolov conducted in the city of Zeya.

[Continue reading...](#)

03.10.2023 - Three years of forced labor for reading the Bible. Yuriy Chernykh, father of a minor child, was found guilty of extremism

JW - On September 28, 2023, the Central District Court of Prokopyevsk found Yuriy Chernykh guilty of participating in the activities of an extremist organization. Judge, Alyona Novosyolova, sentenced him to three years of forced labor, along with 15% of his salary going to the State.

The case was initiated on November 5, 2021. Previously, Yuriy was a witness in the case of Andrey Vlasov. In July 2020, the Chernykhs' house was searched, after which he and his wife were interrogated by the FSB. When the Chernykhs were searched again in November 2021, their electronic media and a television, as well as postcards and personal records, were seized.

[Continue reading...](#)

04.10.2023 - Searches were carried out in Moscow and Kirov in connection with the activities of the recognized undesirable Revival Church.

Sova - On October 4, 2023, the departments of the Investigative Committee for the Kirov region and Moscow reported the initiation of a criminal case under Art. 284.1 of the Criminal Code regarding the continuation of the activities of Vladimir Muntyan's Revival Charitable Foundation based in Ukraine and the religious organization All-Ukrainian Spiritual Center Revival.

The case was initiated regarding the continuation of the activities of Vladimir Muntyan's Revival Charitable Foundation and the religious organization All-Ukrainian Spiritual Center Revival, based in Ukraine.

[Continue reading...](#)

02.10.2023 - The Kryashen organization saw an insult to the feelings of believers in the film "Mikulay"

Sova - On October 2, 2023, it became known that activists of the Kryashen public organization from Yelabuga demand that the film "Mikulay" starring Viktor Sukhorukov be withdrawn from distribution. In their opinion, director Ilshat Rakhimbai made an anti-Kryashen and slanderous film that offends the feelings of believers.

The film was released in June 2023. Representatives of the Kryashen organization believe that it "is provocative in nature, imbued with disrespect . "

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Religious persecution denounced at the OSCE by a "foreign agent"

Sova Center (06.10.2023) - At the Warsaw Human Conference, Olga Sibireva made following statement about religious persecution in Russia.

"Dear participants, my name is Olga Sibireva. I am obliged by Russian law to say that the non-profit organization Sova Center was designated in Russia as a foreign agent.

I would like to draw your attention to some of the problems in the sphere of freedom of conscience that exist in Russia today.

1. The unjustified persecution of religious organizations as allegedly extremist continues. Jehovah's Witnesses are still subjected to the most massive repressions. Their sentences are more severe, including for the elderly and people with disabilities. As of mid-September 2023, 125 Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned in colonies and pre-trial detention centers.

2. More religious organizations were added to the list of organizations whose activities have been declared undesirable in Russia. Over the past year, two Ukrainian Charismatic Protestant organizations were added to the list: the All-Ukrainian Spiritual Center *Renaissance* and the associated *Renaissance* charitable foundation as well as the U.S.-based Full Gospel Church Transformation Center Covenant Network.

Believers face administrative and criminal charges for cooperation with "undesirable" religious organizations. For example, in July, Pentecostal pastors Nikolai Ulitin and Sviatoslav Yugov were sentenced to three and a half years of imprisonment each for cooperation with the *New Generation* Church.

3. The status of "foreign agent" also imposes serious restrictions on the ability to carry out any activities. In 2023, for the first time, important religious figures were included in the list of individuals – foreign agents: the Supreme Lama of Kalmykia, Telo Tulku Rinpoche, and the former Chief Rabbi of Moscow, Pinchas Goldschmidt. Both religious leaders had left Russia even before that.

4. Defamatory materials about religious minorities are still regularly published in federal and regional media, without any public condemnation, much less administrative sanctions.

Recommendations to OSCE participating States:

- To abandon the practice of recognizing organizations as extremist and banning organizations on the basis of their doctrine as such, including the assertion of the superiority of their religion over others. And, accordingly, abandon the practice of prosecuting followers of the relevant religious movements for religious meetings and joint prayers as participation in banned organizations. (In Russia, this applies, for example, to Jehovah's Witnesses, followers of Said Nursi (banned as the *Nurdjular* organization), *Tablighi Jamaat*, and *Alla Ayat*).
- To abandon bans on books and other religious materials on similar grounds. It is even better not to use the mechanism of creating a list of banned books and other materials at all.
- To abandon the use of the concepts of "undesirable organization," "foreign agent," and similar defamatory labels that are not based on clear legal criteria, including in relation to religious associations.
- Abolish far-fetched restrictions on preaching and other religious statements that narrow down the freedom of such statements more than the freedom of expression in general. (In Russia, repeal the "anti-missionary" amendments from the 2016 Yarovaya Package).
- Avoid discriminatory and defamatory statements by public officials and state-sponsored media against religious communities, especially religious minorities. In practice, this most often concerns some Muslim and Protestant associations and new religious movements."

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest September 16-30

29.09.2023 - In the Tver region, a priest was forced to repent for praying for peace

Sova Center - On September 25, 2023, it became known that in the Tver region parishioners complained about the rector of the Church of Elijah the Prophet in the village of Pogoreloe Gorodishche, priest Ilya Gavryshkiv. The reason for the complaint was that he refused to read the "Prayer for Holy Rus'" prescribed by the patriarch, prayed for peace and signed a letter from the clergy in March 2022 against military actions in Ukraine.

[Continue reading...](#)

28.09.2023 - The Court of Cassation upheld the decisions of the Lower Courts regarding five believers from the City of Blagoveshchensk

JW - On September 26, a panel of judges of the Ninth Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction in Vladivostok upheld the verdict of **Sergey Afanasiyev, Anton Olshevskiy, Sergey Kardakov, Adam Svarichevskiy and Sergey Yermilov**. Each of them received more than six years in a penal colony for their faith.

It was noted in one of the court of cassation's appeals, that "Even in Soviet times, during the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, believers were not always sentenced to imprisonment, especially for such a long period as in the present case".

[Continue reading ...](#)

25.09.2023 - Appeal Court in Novosibirsk upheld the sentence for Dmitriy Dolzhikov – 2 years of forced labor for his faith in Jehovah God

JW- On September 22, 2023, the Novosibirsk Regional Court upheld the verdict against **Dmitriy Dolzhikov**. Earlier, the court of the first instance sentenced him to 3 years in a penal colony, but replaced the term with forced labor. Taking into account the time spent under arrest, he will only have to serve 2 years of forced labor.

The court of appeal ignored the arguments of Dolzhikov, who stated: "The law does not consider practising, including together with others, the religion to which the liquidated religious associations belonged as a sign of extremism." In his appeal, Dmitriy stated: "The court did not establish the presence of motives of religious hatred or enmity in my actions; It has not been established against which specific social group I acted. All my actions were completely peaceful. I did not do anything that would indicate the continuation of the activities of any extremist organization."

[Continue reading...](#)

25.09.2023 - Based on the results of the hearings, the Voronezh authorities did not approve the construction of an Old Believer temple

Sova - On August 8, 2023, it became known that public hearings were being held in Voronezh on the issue of providing a plot of land in the city center, on Letchika Zamkina Street, 14, for the construction of a temple. All three participants in the hearing spoke out against the allocation of land.

The documents do not indicate what kind of temple was supposed to be built on this site, however, meetings of believers of the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church are held in the vicinity of the indicated address.

Participants in the hearings suggested that this was specifically about the construction of an Old Believer temple. Among the arguments expressed by opponents of the construction is the lack of parishioners of the Russian Orthodox Church in the microdistrict.

[Continue reading...](#)

21.09.2023 - The Court in the Amur Region handed down suspended sentences of two to three years to three women for reading the Bible

JW - On September 21, 2023, the Judge, Ivan Moiseyenko of the Zeya District Court of the Amur Region, found **Margarita Moiseyenko**, 44, **Yelena Yatsyk**, 51, and Galina Yatsik, 72, guilty of participating in the activities of an extremist organization and sentenced them to suspended sentences.

The prosecutor asked to send the believers to a penal colony for terms of two and a half to three years, but the court gave Margarita Moiseyenko, three years suspended sentence with deprivation of the right to engage in activities related to leadership and participation in the work of public organizations for three years and restriction of liberty for ten months with a probationary period of three years. Galina Yatsik received a two years of suspended sentence with deprivation of the right to engage in activities related to leadership and participation in the work of public organizations for three years, restriction of liberty for six months with a probationary period of two years.

[Continue reading...](#)

21.09.2023- New searches and a Criminal Case in Moscow and Moscow Region.

JW - On September 19, 2023, the homes of at least nine families of Jehovah's Witnesses were searched in several districts of Moscow and in the Moscow Region (the towns of Solnechnogorsk, Fryazino, Dmitrov, and Chekhov). **Aleksandr Serebryakov**, who is serving a suspended sentence, was sent to a detention center based on a new accusation.

Six days earlier, Captain of Justice, Roman Ivanov, senior investigator of the Main Investigative Directorate of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the city of Moscow, , initiated a criminal case against Serebryakov and unidentified persons under the article on financing the activities of an extremist organization. According to the lawyer, Aleksandr is accused of actions in the period from 2018 to 2019, when he was already accused under another article.

[Continue reading...](#)

21.09.2023 - Appeal in Krasnoyarsk upheld Ivan Shulyuk's sentence: Seven years suspended sentence for his convictions

JW - On September 19, 2023, by the decision of a panel of judges of the Krasnoyarsk Regional Court chaired by Diana Davydenko, the sentence against **Ivan Shulyuk**, 47, a Jehovah's Witness from Siberia, was enforced.

In May 2023, the court imposed a seven year suspended sentence on Shulyuk with a four year probationary period. They viewed the discussion of the Bible, prayers and singing religious songs with friends as organizing the activities of an extremist organization. The believer does not agree with the sentence that was enforced. In his final statement to the court of appeal, he said that the investigation is confusing the meaning of the law, as it "deliberately interprets legitimate religious activity as being the activity of a banned legal entity."

[Continue reading...](#)

21.09.2023 - An imam from Mari El was fined for storing Said Nursi's books in a mosque.

Sova - In September 2023, we learned that on March 30, the Zvenigovsky District Court fined two thousand rubles under Art. 20.29 Code of Administrative Offenses (storage of extremist materials for the purpose of mass distribution) by Rafail Safin . On June 5, 2023, this decision was upheld by the Supreme Court of Mari El.

[Continue reading...](#)

21.09.2023 - Rustam Seidkuliev, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, was deported to Turkmenistan, although the Court allowed him to stay in Russia for another six months

JW - On September 17, 2023, employees of the Federal Migration Service, contrary to a court decision, deported Rustam Seidkuliev to Turkmenistan. Earlier, at the initiative of the FSB, his Russian citizenship was revoked due to criminal prosecution for his faith.

Seidkuliev was sentenced to two years and four months to penal colony for participating in worship services and talking about Bible topics. In total, Rustam spent a little more than a year and ten months behind bars. After Seidkuliev's release from the colony, additional punishment came into force. It was not associated with imprisonment and allowed him to live with his wife and move freely around Saratov, and to communicate with friends and to work.

[Continue reading...](#)

20.09.2023 - Aleksandr Nikolayev, father of five, convicted for his faith, was released from the Colony

JW - On September 19, 2023, Aleksandr Nikolayev, a father of five, was released from a penal colony in Khadyzhensk, where he spent almost a year for his faith in Jehovah God. The believer was greeted by his wife and children, and mother-in-law. At the colony's exit an FSB and police officers were on duty, and there were several police vans.

The verdict - two and a half years in prison - was handed down to Nikolayev in December 2021. Aleksandr was the first believer to be given a real prison sentence after the decision of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, explaining that participation in worship services is not a reason for conviction under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Despite this, the man was found guilty of extremism for reading a Bible passage via video conferencing.

[Continue reading...](#)

20.09.2023 - In the Smolensk region, it was decided to demolish an illegally built house of worship

Sova - On September 18, 2023, it became known that the administration of the Vyazemsky district of the Smolensk region filed a lawsuit against Alisher Ch. for the demolition of an illegally built prayer house. In September, the defendant admitted the claims in full and agreed to voluntarily demolish the building.

The building of the prayer house was built on the territory of the Druzhba-1 SNT. In 2022, the Committee on Architecture and Land Management and the prosecutor's office began an investigation into the unauthorized seizure of municipal land, possible violation of building codes, and illegal religious activity.

The district administration confirmed that it had not issued a construction permit to Alisher Ch. and filed a lawsuit to declare the construction illegal and impose the obligation on the defendant to demolish it.

[Continue reading...](#)

20.09.2023 - Jehovah's Witness arrested in Cherkessk

Sova - The 36-year-old believer is suspected of continuing the activities of the banned community.

On September 20, 2023, the investigative department of the Investigative Committee for the Karachay-Cherkess Republic reported that a criminal case had been opened in Cherkessk under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization). A 36-year-old Jehovah's Witness was detained and then sent to a pre-trial detention center .

[Continue reading...](#)

More than 2000 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses searched in six years

730 JW's criminally charged and 400 jailed

By Willy Fautré

[The European Times](#) (23.09.2023) - Since the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017, more than 2,000 homes of believers have been subjected to lengthy searches. Nearly 400 people were thrown in jail.

A total of 730 people, including 166 women, were criminally prosecuted over the past six years. Almost a quarter of all victims of criminal prosecution for their faith are over 60 years old—173 people. The oldest is 89-year-old Elena Zayshchuk from Vladivostok. In May 2023, during a raid on believers in Novocheboksarsk, Chuvashia, Yuriy Yuskov, an 85-year-old local believer, learned that he was being criminally prosecuted.

Special operations against Jehovah's Witnesses

Searches have taken place in almost every part of Russia—in 77 regions.

The largest numbers were in Krasnoyarsk Territory (119), Primorye Territory (97), Krasnodar Territory (92), Voronezh Region (79), Stavropol Territory (65), Rostov Region (56), Chelyabinsk Region (55), Moscow (54), Trans-Baikal Territory (53), Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area (50), Kemerovo Region (47), Tatarstan (46), Khabarovsk Territory (44), Astrakhan Region (43), and Kirov Region (41). On the peninsula of Crimea, including Sevastopol, Russian authorities conducted a total of 98 searches of homes of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Here are the largest operations conducted against believers in a single day: 64 searches in Voronezh (July 2020); [35 searches in Sochi](#) (October 2019); [27 searches in Astrakhan](#) (June 2020); [27 searches in Nizhny Novgorod](#) (July 2019); [23 search in Chita](#) (February 2020); [23 searches in Krasnoyarsk](#) (November 2018); [22 searches in Unecha and Novozybkovo](#), Bryansk region (June 2019); [22 searches in Birobidzhan](#) (May 2018); [22 searches in Moscow](#) (November 2020); [22 searches in Surgut](#) (February 2019); and [20 searches in Kirsanov](#), Tambov region (December 2020).

These are the largest one-day special operations conducted in the last 15 months: [17 searches in Vladivostok](#) (March 2023); [16 searches in Simferopol](#) on the Crimean Peninsula (December 2022); [13 searches in Chelyabinsk](#) (September 2022); and [16 searches in Rybinsk](#), Yaroslavl Region (July 2022).

Testimonies

[The special operation in Voronezh](#) in July 2020 was the largest raid on Jehovah's Witnesses. The Investigative Committee reported that more than 110 searches were conducted. From the regional capital alone, 64 searches were reported. Five believers reported [abuse](#) and [torture](#) by security forces.

Ten people were sent to pre-trial detention centers. Yuri Galka and Anatoly Yagupov were able to report from the detention center that on the day they were detained, they were suffocated with bags and beaten in an effort to force a confession. In addition, Aleksandr Bokov, Dmitry Katyrov, and Aleksandr Korol stated that they were beaten.

[During the special operation in Irkutsk](#), which took place in October 2020, windows and doors in their homes were broken. People were beaten and tortured, such as Anatoly Razdobarov, Nikolai Merinov, and their wives. During medical examinations, these and other Jehovah's Witnesses documented multiple injuries. [Andrei Tolmachev](#), the only son of his retired parents, was beaten to unconsciousness right in front of their eyes during the search. He and [seven other](#) local Jehovah's Witnesses have been confined to a pre-trial detention center for more than 600 days.

[The special operation in Moscow](#), which took place in November 2020, was widely covered on Russian television. Law enforcement officers wearing helmets and bulletproof vests and carrying automatic rifles broke down doors, threw several Jehovah's Witnesses to the floor, and handcuffed or tied their hands behind their backs with plastic clamps. During one search, they first twisted the arms of a neighbor of the believers, but when they realized they had made a mistake, they began breaking down the door to the believers' apartment. The head of the family had his hands tied, was thrown on the floor, and was hit with the butt of submachine gun on the back. During another search, law enforcers struck 49-year-old Vardan Zakaryan in the head [with the butt of an automatic rifle](#). The believer was hospitalized and kept in the hospital under heavy guard.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest September 01-15

15.09.2023 - The Court of the City of Kazan sent Sergey Gromov to a penal colony for six years for conducting religious meetings

JW- On September 14, 2023, the examination of the case of Jehovah's Witness, **Sergey Gromov**, was completed in the Moskovskiy District Court of the city of Kazan. Judge Alsu Gumirova found him guilty of extremism and sentenced him to six years and one month of imprisonment for peacefully practicing his faith.

Gromov's guilt, according to the investigation, is that he "conducted religious meetings" at home. Although, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation ruled that worship services in themselves are not a crime, the investigator, followed by the judge, equated holding such meetings with organizing the activities of an extremist organization. The prosecutor asked to sentence Sergey to eight years in prison. The believer considers himself innocent and can appeal the verdict.

[Continue reading ...](#)

15.09.2023 - The Court of Cassation in Vladivostok upheld the conviction of believers from Yelizovo

JW- On September 12, 2023, the Ninth Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction in Vladivostok upheld the sentence of Konstantin Bazhenov and his wife Snezhana, as well as Vera Zolotova, to 2 years suspended sentence for their convictions.

Court proceedings against believers from Yelizovo have been going on for 4 years. In September 2020, the judge of the Yelizovsky District Court, Yuliya Piskun, handed down a guilty verdict to all three, which was approved by the appeal, but in November 2021, the Court of Cassation overturned this decision and returned the case to the appeal stage. In January 2022, a second appeal acquitted the believers. However, the prosecutor's office, through the Supreme Court, succeeded in overturning this decision. As a result, the case was sent for a new appeal, the believers were found guilty of extremism and received suspended sentences. The believers filed the cassation appeal.

[Continue reading...](#)

13.09.2023 - A court in Primorye refused to transfer shaman Gabyshev to a milder type of treatment

Sova Center - On July 28, 2023, the Primorsky Regional Court satisfied the appeal submission of the Ussuri city prosecutor to cancel the decision of the Ussuri city court to transfer shaman **Alexander Gabyshev** to a milder type of treatment and sent the case to the same court for a new trial.

On September 12, the Ussuriysky District Court, having considered the case again, refused to satisfy the defense's request to transfer Gabyshev to a general psychiatric hospital.

[Continue reading...](#)

13.09.2023- Attacks on women wearing hijabs and niqabs in Moscow and the Moscow Region

Sova - In late August and early September 2023, at least three girls wearing Muslim headscarves were attacked in Moscow and the Moscow region.

On September 1, 2023, a passenger on the Moscow metro reprimanded a girl wearing a niqab, Elizaveta Baranovskaya (according to another account of the event, there were

two girls in niqabs). The passenger was angered by the girl's covered face, which he considered a «terrorist threat.» «While our Russian boys are being killed at the SMO (special military operation), these here are just chilling. I want her to take this thing off and wear normal clothes,» he said. Some of the passengers supported the right to wear religious clothing, others supported the angry man.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.09.2023 - A false "Buddhist diplomacy": State-controlled Chinese and Russian Buddhists support each other

Bitter Winter - Buddhist bureaucrats loyal to their governments attended an "international Buddhist forum" in Ulan-Ude, Buryatia. Putin himself sent a message. Russian and Chinese State-controlled Buddhist organizations both have a problem of credibility. As "Bitter Winter" reported last year, the then Supreme Lama of Kalmyk Buddhists, Telo Tulku Rinpoche (Erdne Ombadykow), became in October 2022 the first Russian high-profile religious leader to condemn the war of aggression against Ukraine. He even said that in his opinion "the Ukrainian side is right." Obviously, he had to escape to Mongolia, where he catered to tens of thousands of Russian Buddhists who fled there to avoid conscription. In January 2023, Telo Tulku Rinpoche was declared a "foreign agent" in Russia and compelled to resign.

[Continue reading...](#)

11.09.2023 - In Saratov, a Muslim tried to perform namaz in a temple

Sova Center - On September 9, 2023, it became known that in Saratov a Muslim came to the Orthodox Church of St. ap. Peter and Paul on Molodezhnaya Street to perform namaz.

The priest began to explain why this should not be done, and reminded that there are mosques and other suitable places in Saratov. The man insisted. To get him out of the temple, it was necessary to call a rapid response team.

According to witnesses, the visitor "obviously did not shine even with superficial knowledge of the Koran, which even the priest himself possessed . "

Activists of the "Russian Community" considered the Muslim's act a provocation and incitement of hatred and said that they would make sure that he received punishment.

[Continue reading...](#)

08.09.2023 - The Appeal in Kemerovo upheld the sentence of Lyubov Serebryakova, 72.

JW - On September 5, 2023, the Kemerovo Regional Court upheld the verdict of **Lubov Serebryakova**, 72, who was sentenced to four years of suspended sentence with a probation period of three years and restriction of liberty for ten months for talking about God. The verdict may be appealed in the court of cassation.

In her appeal, Lubov Serebryakova pointed out the mistakes that, in her opinion, were made by the court of first instance. For example, the verdict does not describe the specific extremist actions that she had participated in that prosecution claims to have taking place.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.09.2023 - In Novochoerkassk, the case of three Jehovah's Witnesses was brought to court

Sova - All three, including the elderly woman, spent more than a year in pre-trial detention.

On September 6, 2023, the investigative department of the Investigative Committee for the Rostov region announced that the case of three Jehovah's Witnesses from Novochoerkassk had been transferred to court. 56-year-old **Garegin Khachatryan** and 36-year-old **Gevorg Yeritsyan** are accused under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization), and 67-year-old **Lyubov Galitsyna** - under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization). The case came to court on August 20.

[Continue reading...](#)

06.09.2023 - A verdict has been issued in the case of three Jehovah's Witnesses from Nizhnekamsk

Sova - In September 5, 2023, the Nizhnekamsk City Court of the Republic of Tatarstan found guilty under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization) of Jehovah's Witnesses Denis Filatov, Stanislav Klyuchnikov and Dmitry Yarchak and sentenced them to six years in prison.

The corresponding criminal case was initiated in November 2020 in Nizhnekamsk. On November 18, 12 Jehovah's Witnesses were searched there; believers were interrogated about their involvement in the activities of the Kazan community. In August 2021, **Filatov, Klyuchnikov and Yarchak** became suspects in this case, a written undertaking not to leave the place was taken from them, and in early October of the same year they received the status of accused.

[Continue reading...](#)

06.09.2023 - A worship cross was cut down in the Omsk region

Sova - On the night of August 31, 2023, unknown persons cut down a worship cross installed several years ago at the entrance to the village of Azovo, Omsk Region.

"The height of the metal base is more than two meters. This means that the hooligan prepared thoroughly: in order to reach the cross, he probably brought a ladder with him. Local residents regard such an act of vandalism as a provocation, an insult to the feelings of believers and banal disrespect for a working person," local Channel 12 reported.

The cross was installed at the expense of local residents.

The police began searching for the vandals.

06.09.2023 - In Tatarstan, three of Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to long suspended sentences.

JW - On September 5, 2023, the Judge of the Nizhnekamsk City Court of the Republic of Tatarstan sentenced to six years of suspended imprisonment: **Sergey Kamenov, Denis Filatov, Stanislav Klyuchnikov and Dmitriy Yarchak**, who has had a disability since childhood. The court considered prayers and the singing of religious songs to be extremism.

The verdict has not yet entered into force and can be appealed. Believers insist on their complete innocence.

In November 2020, the Investigative Directorate of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Republic of Tatarstan initiated a criminal case and conducted a series of searches in the city of Nizhnekamsk. An investigation was launched against the three men, which lasted fourteen months. In January 2022, the case went to court, where it was considered for another nineteen months. All this time, the believers were under recognizance agreement.

[Continue reading...](#)

01.09.2023 - The Astrakhan Regional Court approved a seven-year prison sentence for three Jehovah's Witnesses

Sova - The Astrakhan Regional Court confirmed the verdict of Sergei Korolev, Sergei Kosyanenko and Rinat Kiramov, found guilty under Art. 282.2 and 282.3 of the Criminal Code.

On August 31, 2023, the Astrakhan Regional Court confirmed the verdict passed on April 17, 2023 by the Akhtubinsky District Court to Jehovah's Witnesses **Rinat Kiramov, Sergei Korolev** and **Sergei Kosyanenko**. accused. Each of them was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment to be served in a general regime colony with a three-year ban on activities related to the management of public organizations and participation in them and restriction of freedom for a year under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization) and Part 1 of Art. 282.3 of the Criminal Code (financing extremist activities).

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Five Russian Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to 30 years in prison in all

By Willy Fautré

As of 18 August 2023, a total of 116 Witnesses were in prison in Russia for practicing their faith in private.

In April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court ruled the activity of the "Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses" to be extremist and it ordered that the center and all its regional divisions must be liquidated. It ordered that the organization's property be confiscated in the state's favor.

Four believers received more than 6 years in a penal colony each on a second appeal

On 5 September, the Amur Regional Court upheld the prison terms of four Jehovah's Witnesses for meetings with fellow believers. Vladimir Bukin, Valeriy Slashchev and Sergey Yuferov will have to serve a sentence of six years and four months in prison, and Mikhail Burkov - six years and two months. The verdict has entered into force.

Back in October 2022, the Tyndinskiy District Court [sentenced](#) the believers to various terms of imprisonment ranging from six years and two months to six years and six months. However, an appeal [overturned](#) this decision, and the men were released from the pre-trial detention center, where they had spent two months each. The retrial of the case was completed in June 2023. Judge Valentina Brikova issued [a verdict](#) that differed slightly from the first one - from six years and two months to six years and four months in prison.

In their appeals, the believers noted that "the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation did not ban the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses and did not assess the legitimacy of the religious beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses and the ways in which they were expressed."

According to the convicts, it follows that "despite the liquidation of legal entities, [they] still have the right to freely practice the religion of [their] choice, including reading the Bible and discussing it with others, praying to God, singing songs praising God, and talking to other people about their faith." Believers still insist on their innocence.

Court of Appeal in Krasnoyarsk upheld Aleksandr Filatov's sentence — 6 years in a penal colony

On 20 July 20, 2023, a panel of judges of the Krasnoyarsk Territory Court, chaired by Tatyana Lukyanova, upheld the [verdict](#) against 38-year-old Aleksandr Filatov. The father of two young children has been transferred to the penal colony No. 31 in the village Industrialniy (Krasnoyarsk).

Filatov was convicted on charges of "organizing the activity of a banned extremist organization", but in fact for discussing the Bible with his fellow believers. He still maintains being not guilty of extremism. In his appeal, he stated that the court violated his rights guaranteed by Article 28 of the RF Constitution: "I carried out actions underlying within the framework of freedom of religion."

The defense pointed out that the court did not apply [the explanations](#) of the Plenum of the RF Supreme Court, according to which believers have the right to hold meetings for worship if they do not contain signs of extremism. Aleksandr Filatov stated: "The presence of extremist goals and motives in my actions has not been proven. The verdict does not quote any extremist statements."

The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia has been going on for more than six years and is gaining momentum, despite the [condemnation](#) of the world community. In the Krasnoyarsk Territory alone, [30 believers](#) are facing criminal prosecution for their faith. Almost half of them were already sentenced: five have been sent to a penal colony, four have been given suspended sentences, and three have been fined.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest August 16-31

31.08.2023 - Former priest Ioann Kurmoyarov sentenced for "fakes" about the army

Sova Center - On August 31, 2023, the Kalininsky District Court of St. Petersburg delivered a guilty verdict in the case of former priest **John Kurmoyarov**.

The court found him guilty under s. "g" and "d" part 2 of Art. 207.3 of the Criminal Code (public dissemination under the guise of reliable messages of knowingly false information containing data on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation for mercenary motives, motivated by political, ideological hatred) and sentenced to three years in prison in a penal colony with a ban on administering websites for two of the year.

[Continue reading...](#)

29.08.2023- In Moscow, a foreign citizen fined for namaz

Sova - On July 26, 2023, the Lyublinsky District Court of Moscow fined a foreign citizen, Saijon Vohidov, for "illegal missionary work."

The court found him guilty under Part 5 of Art. 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (carrying out missionary activities in violation of the requirements of legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations, committed by a foreign citizen) and sentenced him to a fine without administrative expulsion from the country.

The reason for bringing to responsibility was his holding a prayer near the multi-level parking lot on the occasion of Eid al-Adha. He, having gathered a group of Muslims, read a prayer, while he called himself an imam.

In court, Vohidov pleaded guilty, noting that "he has no special education and authority to conduct missionary activities as a foreign citizen," and he proclaimed himself an imam.

29.08.2023 - A Court in Orenburg equated friendly meetings in a cafe with extremism.

JW - On August 28, 2023, Diana Sudorgina, judge of the Promyshlenniy District Court of Orenburg, found five Jehovah's Witnesses guilty of participating in the activity of an extremist organization and gave them from 2.5 to 3.5 years suspended sentences. The prosecutor had requested for them the same lengths of terms, but in a general regime penal colony. The believers plead not guilty of extremism.

Sergey Logunov, 60, was given a 2.5-year suspended sentence with restriction of liberty for 8 months and a probation period of 2 years. The court gave 30-year-old **Vladislav Kolbanov** a 3.5-year suspended with restriction of liberty for 10 months and a probation period of 3 years. **Vladimir Kochnev**, 42, was given a suspended sentence of 2 years and 8 months with restriction of freedom for 10 months and a probation period of 2 years and 2 months. The judge gave 42-year-old **Pavel Lekontsev** a 3-year suspended sentence with restriction of liberty for 10 months and a probation period of 2.5 years. 47-year-old **Nikolay Zhugin**, 47, was given a 2.5-year suspended sentence with restriction of liberty for 8 months and a probation period of 2 years. The judge placed all believers under a recognizance agreement.

[Continue reading...](#)

25.08.2023 - Biysk Baptists filed a lawsuit against the mayor's office

Sova Center - On August 24, 2023, it became known that the Biysk Evangelical Christian Baptist Church filed a lawsuit with the Altai Territory Arbitration Court against the city administration. The essence of the claim is unknown, the amount of claims is 1.5 million rubles.

In 2020, the church has already gone to court, trying to obtain recognition of the religious organization's ownership of the prayer house it built on the street. Dostoevsky, 34 a. The court then dismissed the claim.

It can be assumed that now the church is again trying to legitimize the building. As third parties, the architectural committee of the mayor's office, the Moscow Municipal Institution "Management of municipal property of the administration of Biysk", the department of the Federal Service for State Registration, Cadastre and Cartography in the Altai Territory and several citizens were involved in the dispute.

24.08.2023 - Freedom of religion and belief monitoring group to be liquidated

Forum 18 - Russia's leading freedom of religion and belief monitoring group ceases to exist as a legal entity. On 17 August, a Moscow Appeal Court rejected SOVA Center for Information and Analysis's appeal against its liquidation. Moscow's Justice Department claimed it committed "gross violations" of the law by holding events outside Moscow. SOVA's director Aleksandr Verkhovsky notes the "obvious and extreme selectivity" of the Justice Department's claims against human rights groups "but not to hundreds of others". The Non-Governmental Organisations Department at Moscow's Justice Department refused comment.

The SOVA Center for Information and Analysis is to be dissolved after an appeal judge in Moscow upheld the liquidation order imposed by a lower court four months ago. SOVA, Russia's leading human rights organisation monitoring freedom of religion and belief, as well as nationalism and xenophobia, will now cease to exist as a legal entity, but its staff insist that their work will continue.

[Continue reading...](#)

23.08.2023 - Russian persecution of evangelicals exceeding that of Soviet era, Mission Eurasia president says

Baptistpress - The raid by secret police of Russian evangelical leader Yuri Sipko's home will not silence the former Baptist Union president's "uncompromised" stance.

Sergey Rakhuba, president of Mission Eurasia, promised as much in comments he shared with Baptist Press. (See related story.)

"I have personally known Yuri Sipko for a long time," Rakhuba said. "He is an uncompromised, powerful leader and preacher of the Gospel for whom truth is the most important thing."

Sipko's home was one of many among prominent evangelical leaders that was raided by the FSB, Russia's secret police, Mission Eurasia reported on Aug. 8.

A critic of his home country's invasion of neighboring Ukraine, Sipko was accused of spreading false information about the Russian government and its army's actions in Ukraine. He fled his home prior to the raid and is now in a safe location, reported Mission Eurasia.

[Continue reading...](#)

23.08.2023 - Russia charges former Baptist leader with criminal slander

Baptistpress - The former president of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists – a critic of Russia's war against Ukraine – recently fled his homeland when authorities pressed criminal charges against him. (See related story.)

Russian officials charged Yuri Sipko, a former vice president of the Baptist World Alliance, with slandering the Russian military and posting "fake news" online about Russian armed forces involved in the invasion of Ukraine.

"I am unquestionably innocent of the charges against me," Sipko stated in an email to the Baptist Standard.

[Continue reading...](#)

23.08.2023 - The appeal upheld the verdict of two Jehovah's Witnesses from the City of Taganrog.

JW - According to the decision of the panel of judges of the Rostov Regional Court, on August 22, 2023, the sentence for Aleksandr Skvortsov and Valeriy Tibiy came into force: seven years in prison and six years of suspended sentence, respectively. The believers continue to insist on their innocence and have the right to appeal the verdict in the court of cassation.

Skvortsov and Tibiy were convicted, in fact, for professing beliefs based on the Bible. The appeal drew attention to the fact that "singing songs praising God, turning to God in prayer, discussing the Bible together" - actions for which believers were accused of as continuing the activities of an extremist organization - are "a way of professing his religion, guaranteed by both national and international law" and "does not depend on the presence or absence of a legal entity." The believers' lawyer stressed that the court did not provide a single evidence that the defendants had a motive of religious enmity or hatred.

[Continue reading...](#)

21.08.2023 - 2 minutes for believers of all faiths in prison in Russia

European Times - At the end of July, the Court of Cassation upheld the 2 years and 6 months in prison sentence against Aleksandr Nikolaev.

The court had found him guilty of participating in the activities of an extremist organization, the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses.

In fact, he was just reading the Bible and discussing religious issues in private with relatives and friends. The investigation considered it "a crime against the foundations of the constitutional order and the security of the state".

No evidence was presented in court that the convict had committed any unlawful acts or that his behaviour was of a socially dangerous nature.

[Continue reading...](#)

18.08.2023 - Case of six members of At-Takfir Wal-Hijra brought to court

Sova - On August 16, 2023, it became known that the indictment was approved in the case of six residents of the North Caucasus Federal District accused of collaborating with At-Takfir Wal-Hijra.

Depending on the role of each, they are charged with Part 1 of Art. 30, paragraph "a" part 2 of Art. 205 of the Criminal Code (preparation for a terrorist act), art. 205.1 of the Criminal Code (assistance to terrorist activities), art. 205.3 of the Criminal Code (undergoing training for the purpose of carrying out terrorist activities), Part 2 of

Art. 223.1 of the Criminal Code (illegal manufacture of explosives and explosive devices), Part 2 of Art. 222.1 of the Criminal Code (illegal possession of explosives and explosive devices), art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization), art. 228 of the Criminal Code (illegal possession of drugs).

[Continue reading...](#)

18.08.2023 - The Court of Appeal in Barnaul sentenced Pavel Kazadaev to penal colony for 3 years

JW - On August 18, 2023, the Altai Regional Court granted the prosecutor's complaint against the sentence to **Pavel Kazadaev**, replacing 3 years of suspended sentence with 3 years in a penal colony for talking about the Bible. The believer was taken into custody in the courtroom. He pleaded not guilty and may appeal the verdict.

Before the ruling of appeal, Pavel said: "I did not continue the activity of a banned organization. I wanted and still want to peacefully confess my faith together with friends, worship God, praise him, learn his commandments and principles. If I stop doing this, then, in fact, I stop being a believer. I did not have extremist motives, I do not feel hatred and enmity towards other people, including people of other religions, therefore my actions could not harm them. There are no victims in my case, and all my friends and relatives described me favorably."

[Continue reading...](#)

17.08.2023 - Pacifist Christian musician fined, banned from internet posting

Forum 18 - Musician and teacher Anna Chagina has been handed a fine and a ban on internet posting for opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. She stood accused of "discrediting" the Russian armed forces more than once in a year. "I also want to remind you of a simple ethical rule – do to others as you would have them do to you," Chagina said in her final statement. Elsewhere, Mikhail Simonov, the first person to be sentenced to jail for opposing the war from a religious perspective, has lost his appeal against his 7-year jail term.

A court in Siberia has handed musician and teacher Anna Chagina a fine and a ban on posting on the internet as punishment for her opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Chagina stood accused of "discrediting" the Russian armed forces more than once in a year – firstly, by displaying a poster reading "Blessed are the peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)" at an anti-war protest, and secondly, by making anti-war posts on social media, including reposts of texts by religious philosopher Nikolay Karpitsky.

[Continue reading...](#)

16.08.2023 - The court sentenced five Scientologists from St. Petersburg

Sova Center - The head of the Church of Scientology in St. Petersburg was sentenced to imprisonment and released, the court imposed heavy fines on the rest of the defendants in the case.

On August 24, 2023, the Nevsky District Court of St. Petersburg issued a verdict in the case of members of the local Church of Scientology. All defendants were found guilty and sentenced as follows:

church leader **Ivan Matsitsky** - six and a half years in prison to be served in a penal colony, as well as a two-year ban on activities in public associations and religious organizations under paragraph "c" of Part 2 of Art. 282 (inciting hatred or enmity by an

organized group) and Part 1 of Art. 282.1 of the Criminal Code (creation of an extremist community), while the court set aside the period of Matsitsky's stay in custody and under house arrest and released him after serving his sentence.

[Continue reading...](#)

The head of the Church of Scientology of St. Petersburg was sentenced to prison and released

The court imposed heavy fines on the rest of the defendants in the case

[SOVA Center](#) (24.08.2023) - On August 24, 2023, the Nevsky District Court of St. Petersburg issued a verdict in the case of members of the local Church of Scientology. The court found all the defendants guilty and imposed the following punishments:

- Church leader Ivan Matsitsitsky - six and a half years of imprisonment with serving a sentence in a general regime colony, as well as a two-year ban on activities in public associations and religious organizations under paragraph "c" of Part 2 of Art. 282 (incitement to hatred or enmity by an organized group) and Part 1 of Art. 282.1 of the Criminal Code (creation of an extremist community), while the court took into account the period of Matsitsi's stay in custody and house arrest and released him after serving his sentence;
- Executive Director Galina Shurinova - a fine of 1.3 million rubles (under the same charges);
- to the head of the own security service Anastasia Terentyeva - a fine of 1.2 million rubles (under the same articles);
- Chief Accountant Sahib Aliyev - a fine of 1 million rubles on the same charges, as well as on p. "b" of Part 4 of Art. 174.1 (money laundering on a particularly large scale);
- Constance Yesaulkova, who was Terentyeva's deputy, - a fine of 600 thousand rubles under paragraph "c" of Part 2 of Art. 282 and Part 2 of Art. 282.1 of the Criminal Code (participation in an extremist community).

Matsitsky, Shurinova, Terentyeva and Aliyev were also found guilty of illegal entrepreneurship committed by an organized group and involving the extraction of income on a particularly large scale (paragraphs "a", "b" of Part 2 of Art. 171), and Esaulkova - of aiding this crime (Part 5 of Art. 33, subparagraphs "a", "b" of Part 2 of Art. 171). From punishment under Art. 171 of the Criminal Code, they were released due to the expiration of the statute of limitations for criminal prosecution.

In addition, the court confiscated 3,600 sheets of paper "externally similar to 100 U.S. dollar banknotes" that were found in the premises of the Church of St. Petersburg.

In the debate of the parties on August 16, 2023, the state Prosecutor asked to sentence Matsitsitsky to eight years in prison in a general regime colony, Shurinova and Terentyev to six years one month, Aliyev to six years three months, and Yesaulkova to three years one month. For everyone except Yesaulkova, the prosecutor also requested additional punishment in the form of deprivation of the right to engage in activities in public associations and religious organizations for a period of one year.

A criminal case against members of the Church of St. Petersburg was [initiated in](#) the summer of 2017. The detainees were then taken into custody, with the exception of Yesaulkova, whom the court placed under house arrest. Subsequently, Shurinova and Terentyeva were also released under house arrest, later Shurinova was released on recognizance. Matsitsky was sentenced to a ban on certain actions, then arrested again, and then placed under house arrest. Aliyev was placed under house arrest, arrested and placed under house arrest again.

During the court hearings on the election of preventive measures, the FSB investigator stated, in particular, that **Scientologists had created an extremist community to humiliate the dignity of some followers of the doctrine**, united in the social group "sources of trouble" (obviously, this is the category of "potential sources of trouble" used by Scientologists). In relation to them, Matsitsky issued "ethical orders" under his signature. One of them forbade guilty adherents to participate in auditing (spiritual practice of communicating with a Scientology consultant), the other, according to the media, forbade studying certain sections of philosophy. In addition, **it was said in court that the defendants distributed extremist literature and promoted the exclusivity of their religion.**

However, according to lawyers, in the final version of the accusations, the emphasis was shifted from specific actions "to criticism of the Scientology doctrine, general goals and methods of the Scientology community."

We tend to consider it inappropriate to prosecute Scientologists for extremism.

The assertion of one's own exclusivity is inherent in any religion, and the persecution of Scientologists and the prohibition of their literature on this basis are untenable. The separation by the investigation of part of the adherents of Scientologists subjected to psychological pressure into a social group protected by anti-extremist legislation seems doubtful to us. In fact, according to Ron Hubbard's concept, which he outlined in the book "Introduction to Scientology Ethics", for the well-being of most adherents, Scientologists should not be allowed to audit (special Scientology practice) and train people with attitudes of certain types, do not bring them closer to themselves; it is preferable to ignore them. But most religions impose certain restrictions on admission to church life and rituals, and the advice of anyone cannot be ignored as a call aimed at inciting hatred or humiliation of dignity.

Sources

- [Nevsky District Court of the city of St. Petersburg announced the verdict against Ivan Matsitsitsky, Sahib Yakub oglu Aliyev, Galina Shurinova, Anastasia Terentyeva and Constance Yesaulkova](#) // Joint Press Service of the Courts of St. Petersburg. Telegram. 2023. August 24.
- [29 years for Scientologists](#) // United Press Service of the Courts of St. Petersburg. Telegram. 2023. August 16.

**Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest
August 01-15**

15.08.2023 - Two Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced in Taiga

Sova Center - **Yuri Usanov and Maxim Morozov** were found guilty under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code.

On August 15, 2023, the Taiginsky City Court of the Kemerovo Region sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses Yuri Usanov and Maxim Morozov to three years in a penal colony and six months of restricted freedom under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization). At the same time, the court took into account the time spent by believers under arrest and released them in the courtroom.

[Continue reading...](#)

14.08.2023 - Mormon fined in Novocherkassk for "illegal missionary work"

Sova Center - On August 10, 2023, it became known that the world court in Novocherkassk found a minister of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints guilty under Part 4 of Art. 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (carrying out missionary activities in violation of the requirements of the legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations). Andrei Mozol was fined 50 thousand rubles.

What exactly was the offense, is not reported. The prosecutor's office of Novocherkassk filed a lawsuit with the court.

The church building was closed in June 2023 due to fire safety violations.

14.08.2023 - The Supreme Lama of Kalmykia is recognized as a foreign agent

Sova Center - On January 27, 2023, the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation included the honorary representative of the Dalai Lama in Russia, the CIS countries and Mongolia - the Supreme Lama of Kalmykia Telo Tulku Rinpoche (Erdni Ombadykov) in the register of individuals acting as a foreign agent. This is the first time a religious figure has been recognized as a foreign agent.

The reason for including him in this list was that he "spoke out against the special military operation in Ukraine and openly spoke in support of Ukraine, is a US citizen. Lives outside the Russian Federation.

On January 28, Telo Tulku Rinpoche delegated authority to Geshe Tendzin Choydak (Mutul Ovyaynov) and Gelong administrator Yonten Lodoy (Sergey Kirishov) of the Kalmyk Central Buddhist Monastery Geden Sheddup Chöi Korling.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.08.2023 - Russian Orthodox priests face persecution from state and church for supporting peace in Ukraine

apnews.com - Standing in an old Orthodox church in Antalya with a Bible in one hand and a candle in the other, the Rev. Ioann Koval led one of his first services in Turkey after Russian Orthodox Church leadership decided to defrock him following his prayer for peace in Ukraine.

Last September, when President Vladimir Putin ordered a partial mobilization of reservists, Moscow Patriarch Kirill required his clergymen to pray for victory. Standing in front of the altar and dozens of his parishioners in one of Moscow's churches, Koval decided to put the peace above the patriarch's orders.

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09.08.2023 - Another criminal case against a Jehovah's Witness initiated in Barnaul

Sova Center - On July 10, 2023, a criminal case was initiated in Barnaul under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in an extremist organization) against Jehovah's Witness **Valery Klovov**.

On July 29, his house was searched, he was detained and taken for interrogation to the investigative department of the Russian Investigative Committee for the Altai Territory, and on July 31, the court appointed him a measure of restraint in the form of house arrest. The investigation believes that since 2021, Klovov and other unidentified persons "carried out actions to support the existence of the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses Barnaul," including by holding conversations in order to promote the activities of this organization, participating in events held by representatives of the organization."

[Continue reading...](#)

09.08.2023 - Russia, Cassation confirms a two years and six months sentence of a Jehovah's Witness

The European Times - On 27 July 2023, the Fourth General Jurisdiction Court of Cassation upheld the sentence and appeal ruling against **Aleksandr Nikolaev**, a resident of Kholmskaya – 2 years and 6 months in prison. At the same time, the court cancelled the additional freedom restriction, which is imposed on the convict after serving the main term.

On 23 December 2021, the Abinsk District Court of the Krasnodar Territory found him guilty of participating in the activities of an extremist organization for reading the Bible and discussing religious issues in private with relatives and friends. The investigation considered it was "a crime against the foundations of the constitutional order and the security of the state" and initiated a criminal case on the grounds under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

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07.08.2023 - Counterfeit forms of Russian Orthodoxy as a challenge to religious freedom

Risu - The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the critical importance of religious freedom in safeguarding national identity and state sovereignty. In a direct sense, the war in Ukraine is a war for freedom, including, and even primarily, religious freedom. Ukraine showcases a consistent commitment to a model where freedom is intertwined with peaceful religious diversity, and they are willing to sacrifice to defend this way of life.

What is surprising is that even amid this dreadful war, many leaders of opinion in Europe and the United States remain in the shadow of the Kremlin and under the spell of Russian Orthodox mythology. It's not just Russian propaganda at work here; there's also a sense of disillusionment with Western Christianity, weariness from freedom and its complexities, and a certain naivety towards the mystery and profundity of chronicled Russian spirituality.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.08.2023 - Court in Yugorsk acquitted Jehovah's Witnesses Ivan Sorokin and Andrey Zhukov

JW - On August 7, 2023, Yuriy Klyupa, judge of the Yugorskiy District Court of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area—Yugra completed the consideration of the case of Ivan Sorokin and Andrey Zhukov and acquitted them. The believers were found not guilty of extremism. The prosecutor requested the court to sentence Sorokin to 9 years, and Zhukov —8.5 years in a penal colony.

In August 2020, a series of searches took place in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area. A total of 16 people were interrogated; Sorokin and Zhukov were sent to a temporary detention facility, and a day later they were released under a recognizance agreement. A criminal case was initiated against them under Parts 1 and 1.1 of Art. 282.2 of the RF Criminal Code (organizing the activity of an extremist organization and involving others in it).

[Continue reading...](#)

04.08.2023 - The Court of Cassation in the Krasnodar Territory left one of Jehovah's Witness Aleksandr Nikolayev behind bars

JW - On July 27, 2023, the Fourth General Jurisdiction Court of Cassation upheld the sentence and appeal ruling against **Aleksandr Nikolayev**, a resident of Kholmskaya – 2 years and 6 months in a penal colony. However, the court canceled the additional restriction of freedom following the main term imposed on the convict.

On December 23, 2021, the Abinsk District Court of the Krasnodar Territory found the believer guilty of participating in the activity of an extremist organization for peacefully practicing the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses and sentenced him to 2.5 years in a penal colony. The court of appeal upheld this decision.

[Continue reading...](#)

03.08.2023 - Two new generation pastors sentenced in Moscow

Bitter Winter - **Nikolai Ulitin and Svyatoslav Yugov** should remain in jail for another three and a half years.

On July 18, Russian media reported that Pastors Nikolai Ulitin and Svyatoslav Yugov of the New Generation Church have been sentenced by a court in the Moscow region. They should remain in jail for another three and a half years. Reportedly, the defendants feared a harsher sentence, and were glad to escape with a comparatively short jail term.

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Cassation confirms a 2 ½ years sentence of a Jehovah's Witness

More than 140 Jehovah's Witnesses are now in prison for practicing their faith in private

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

[HRWF](#) (04.08.2023) - On 27 July 2023, the Fourth General Jurisdiction Court of Cassation upheld the sentence and appeal ruling against Aleksandr Nikolaev, a resident of Kholmskaya - [2 years and 6 months in prison](#). At the same time, the court canceled the additional freedom restriction, which is imposed on the convict after serving the main term.

On 23 December 2021, the Abinsk District Court of the Krasnodar Territory [found](#) him guilty of participating in the activities of an extremist organization for reading the Bible and discussing religious issues in private with relatives and friends. The investigation considered it was "a crime against the foundations of the constitutional order and the security of the state" and initiated a criminal case on the grounds under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

In the cassation complaint, the defense drew attention to significant violations of the norms of the Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code that influenced the outcome of the case. Thus, no evidence was presented in court that the convict had committed any unlawful acts or that his behavior was of a socially dangerous nature. In addition, there was not a single evidence that, exercising his right to freedom of religion, Aleksandr Nikolaev had the intent to commit a crime or a motive to incite hatred or enmity.

Brief history of the case

In April 2021, FSB officers, accompanied by OMON fighters, came with a search to the Nikolaev spouses, who have five children two of whom are adopted. Shortly before, the Investigative Committee opened a criminal case against Alexander Nikolaev, accusing him of participating in extremist activities for reading the Bible. The believer was placed under house arrest for almost six months. In July 2021, the case went to trial. Two months later, he was sent to a pre-trial detention center. In December of the same year, the court sentenced the believer to 2.5 years in a penal colony. In October 2022, the regional court approved the verdict, adding a number of restrictions to the punishment.

At the time of the entry into force of the verdict, Nikolaev had served more than half of his sentence in a pre-trial detention center. In March 2023, he was placed in a colony. In April 2023, the court denied him parole. At the end of July 2023, the cassation instance upheld the verdict, canceling only additional restrictions that would have come into force after the believer left the colony.

More than 140 Jehovah's Witnesses are now behind bars in Russia for practicing their faith in private. See these documented cases in [HRWF Database](#) of FORB prisoners.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest July 16-31

31.07.2023 - Debates on the case of Jehovah's Witnesses took place in Yugorsk

SOVA - Andrei Zhukov and Ivan Sorokin are accused of organizing the activities of a banned community and involving others in it. The prosecutor asks to appoint them long terms of imprisonment.

On July 27, 2023, during the debate on the case of two Jehovah's Witnesses in the Yugorsky District Court of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug-Yugra, the prosecutor asked to sentence Ivan Sorokin to nine years in prison in a penal colony, and Andrey Zhukov to eight and a half years in prison

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28.07.2023 - One of Jehovah's Witnesses Anton Virich was arrested in the Krasnoyarsk Territory.

JW - On July 11, 2023, a believer **Anton Virich**, 43, was detained in the city of Uzhur (Krasnoyarsk Territory). For 9 days, his location remained unknown. Friends found a man in the Spassk-Dalniy pre-trial detention center. He was accused of organizing the activities of an extremist organization.

The car in which Anton and his wife were traveling was stopped by the traffic police. The man was taken to the police station. There, Virich was told that since February 11, 2022, he had been under recognizance agreement, about which he knew nothing and had not received any notifications about it to his address.

[Continue reading...](#)

28.07.2023 - In Krasnodar, the appeal finalized the sentence of six Jehovah's Witnesses from Gukovo: from 6.5 to 7 years in prison for their faith

JW - On July 25, 2023, the panel of judges of the Fourth General Jurisdiction Court of Cassation, chaired by Igor Konyaev, upheld the verdict against six believers from the city of Gukovo and the appeal ruling against it. All of them are already serving their terms in the penal colonies.

Aleksey Goreliy, Oleg Shidlovskiy, Nikita Moiseyev, Aleksey Dyadkin, Vladimir Popov and Yevgeniy Razumov were sentenced to 6.5 to 7 years in prison. Such a harsh sentence was handed down to Jehovah's Witnesses by Judge Natalya Batura of the Gukovsky City Court in September 2022. The believers ended up behind bars in August 2020, immediately after investigators opened a criminal case against them and searched their homes.

The appeal upheld the verdict of the court of first instance, and the believers filed a complaint with the court of cassation. It says: "Law enforcement agencies have not

established a single fact of illegal activities committed by believers. Even . . . [during surveillance] nothing was recorded to assert that . . . Jehovah's Witnesses commit or call for illegal acts. Also, not a single person has been identified who suffered from the activities of believers.”

[Continue reading...](#)

27.07.2023 - In Tver, the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses were searched, a Criminal Case for faith was initiated

JW - On July 24, 2023, searches were carried out in Tver in three houses of local residents who practise the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. A criminal case under an article for extremism was initiated against 40-year-old **Maksim Barbazyuk**, 50-year-old **Aleksandr Kostyuk** and 68-year-old **Valeriy Tolmazov**.

The law enforcement officers began the raid at 6 a.m. Electronic devices were seized during the searches. According to the believers, the law enforcement officers behaved appropriately.

By 3 p.m., the three men were taken for interrogation to the investigative department of the Investigative Committee for the Tver Region, where they were told that on June 29, 2023, a criminal case had been initiated against them. Investigator Maksim Prusakov questioned the believers about their religious views. The interrogations continued until 11 p.m.

[Continue reading...](#)

26.07.2023 - Sergey Klimov released from the Penal Colony in the City of Astrakhan; he has served his sentence

JW - On July 26, 2023, Sergey Klimov was released from the penal colony where he served a sentence for his belief in Jehovah God. Sergey's relatives and many friends met him with flowers and signs. The believer spent a total of five years behind bars.

Sergey was detained and placed in a pre-trial detention center back in June 2018 after searches in the city of Tomsk. In April 2020, when the appellate court upheld the sentence—six years in a general regime penal colony—Klimov was transferred to Astrakhan Penal Colony No. 8 after the announcement of the verdict. Since one day in pre-trial detention counted as a day and a half in the general regime penal colony, Sergey spent three and a half years in the penal colony after the verdict was announced.

[Continue reading...](#)

21.07.2023 - Jailed for refusing mobilisation on grounds of conscience

Forum 18 - Called up in September 2022, Pentecostal Andrey Kapatsyna refused to fight in Ukraine, telling commanders that "in accordance with his religious beliefs, he could not take up arms and use them against other people". A Vladivostok court sentenced him to 2 years, 10 months' imprisonment under new legislation punishing non-fulfilment of orders in a period of combat operations. A Murmansk Region military court jailed Dmitry Vasilets for 2 years, 2 months for refusing on grounds of his new Buddhist faith to return to Ukraine after five months on the frontlines.

[Continue reading...](#)

20.07.2023 - Raids of security forces in mosques near Moscow

SOVA - The security forces conducted anti-migrant raids in the mosques of Kotelniki and Dzerzhinsky near Moscow, disrupting Friday prayers.

On July 7, 2023, OMON officers disrupted Friday prayers in Kotelniki near Moscow. Under the pretext of identifying illegal migrants, they broke into the house of worship during worship, were indoors in shoes, detained believers, using physical force and insulting the audience. More than 60 people were detained during the raid.

A week later, on July 14, a similar raid took place in the Dzerzhinsky mosque near Moscow, also during a service. Some believers were laid face down on the floor.

[Continue reading...](#)

19.07.2023 - Sixty-nine-year-old Yuriy Savelyev was released from a penal colony in the City of Rubtsovsk

JW - On July 19, 2023, Yuriy Savelyev was released from Penal Colony No. 5 in the Altai Territory; he has fully served his sentence. Dozens of friends came to meet the believer. Sixty-nine-year-old Yuriy Savelyev is one of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia whose criminal prosecution for his faith has been dragging on since 2017. The elderly believer was under covert video surveillance. In November 2018, a criminal case was initiated against Yuriy, and in the same month, he ended up in a pre-trial detention center, where he stayed for more than two years until the verdict was announced. In December 2020, the court sentenced Savelyev to six years in a penal colony. Since one day of pre-trial detention counts as one and a half days in a general regime colony, Yuriy actually spent 760 days in a correctional facility after the verdict.

[Continue reading...](#)

18.07.2023 - The Court of Appeal commuted the sentence of Jehovah's Witness from Sovetskaya Gavan

SOVA - The court appointed Alexei Ukhov six and a half years in prison under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code. The Court of Appeal decided that a suspended sentence would be a sufficient punishment.

On July 18, 2023, the Khabarovsk Regional Court considered the appeal of Jehovah's Witness Alexei Ukhov. On March 27, 2023, the Sovetsko-Gavansky City Court sentenced him to six and a half years in a general regime colony under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization). The regional court decided to consider this term conditional.

[Continue reading...](#)

17.07.2023 - Russians oppress uncontrolled denominations

Risu - In the Russian model, the church is only a method of conveying the necessary information to control the population, while the church works in connection with the Kremlin. The latter provides controlled denominations with a monopoly on captured territories.

Currently, the Russians are subjecting a number of organizations on the TOT to repression, in particular, searches were conducted in the parishes of the OCU, GKTU and Jehovah's Witnesses. Some members of religious communities were detained.

[Continue reading...](#)

17.07.2023 - Two Ukrainians face long sentences for Bible studies in Russian-occupied Crimea

khpg.org - Called up in September 2022, Pentecostal Andrey Kapatsyna refused to fight in Ukraine, telling commanders that "in accordance with his religious beliefs, he could not take up arms and use them against other people". A Vladivostok court sentenced him to 2 years, 10 months' imprisonment under new legislation punishing non-fulfilment of orders in a period of combat operations. A Murmansk Region military court jailed Dmitry Vasilets for 2 years, 2 months for refusing on grounds of his new Buddhist faith to return to Ukraine after five months on the frontlines.

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Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest July 01-15

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

SOVA - The representative of the prosecutor's office asked the court to sentence **Pyotr Filiznov** and **Andrey Vyushin** to eight years in prison under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the

Criminal Code, and **Alexander and Maria Kuznetsov** - to four years under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code.

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

13.07.2023 - Tablighi Jamaat followers detained in Moscow and Moscow region

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

07.07.2023 - Long jail terms for Moscow Nursi readers

Forum 18 - Arrested in October 2021, six Muslims who met to study the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi finally went on trial in September 2022. On 27 June 2023, a Moscow court jailed four of the six for 6 years or more, with the others receiving lesser terms. The judge ordered the destruction of books by Nursi taken during the investigation. On 20 June, a Taganrog court jailed Jehovah's Witness *Aleksandr Skvortsov* for 7 years. All were convicted on "extremism" charges, which all denied. The largest trial for eight years of Muslims who met to study the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi has ended in Moscow with prison terms for all six defendants. On 27 June, the court jailed four of the six for terms of six years or more. These are the harshest punishments handed down to Nursi readers since **Ilgar Aliyev** was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in 2018. The court sentenced the other two to two years and seven months each.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.07.2023 - Süleymancılar: Russia cracks down on Turkish Sufi organization

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

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

On July 6, 2023, the department of the Investigative Committee for the Ulyanovsk Region reported on the initiation of a criminal case against a native of Egypt. He became a suspect under Part 1 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (public actions expressing clear disrespect for society and committed in order to offend the religious feelings of believers) and Part 1 of Art. 213 of the Criminal Code (hooliganism motivated by religious hatred or enmity).

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

04.07.2023 - Court toughens sentence for Jehovah's Witnesses from Komsomolsk-on-Amur

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

Dmitry Dolzhikov does not plead guilty: "I carefully read the decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation dated April 20, 2017 [on the liquidation of legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia], but I have not seen anywhere that the court imposed a ban on practicing the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses and that believers would be banned from worshipping God, performing religious services, praying and singing religious songs. There has never been such a ban." The verdict has not entered into force and can be appealed. The believer signed a recognizance agreement.

[Continue reading...](#)

01.07.2023 - Former Chief Rabbi of Moscow recognized as foreign agent

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

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

In 2022, Goldschmidt left Russia.

Süleymancılar: Russia cracks down on Turkish Sufi organization

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

By Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (07.07.2023) - Russian anti-cult web sites [reported on June 27](#) on the ongoing crackdown against the Turkish Sufi organization Süleymancılar in Russia.

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

While anti-cultists define Süleymancılar as a “pseudo-Islamic cult,” in fact the organization traces its roots to one of the largest Sufi brotherhoods, the Naqhsbandiyya. It has some two million members in Turkey and is recognized as part of Islam by mainline Islamic organizations in Germany and the United States.

Naqshbandi shaykh Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan founded the organization in 1920. It suffered under the repression of religious activities by the secular military regimes, and Tunahan was shortly incarcerated. The group, however, survived and with the progressive restoration of religious liberty for Sufi brotherhoods opened in Turkey hundreds of dormitories, where male students received a Muslim education to supplement their attendance at state high schools and universities. The Süleymancılar also opened a variety of businesses, from private hospitals to travel agencies and food and beverage industries.

The founder passed away in 1959 and was succeeded by Kemal Kaçar, who was his son-in-law having married his daughter Bedia Hanım and died in 2000. Kaçar had been a member of both the Turkish and the European Parliament, and his funeral was attended by more than one million people. His successor was Arif Ahmet Denizolgun, the son of another daughter of Tunahan, Feriha Ferhan. He was also a member of the Parliament and served as Minister of Transport in 1998–99. Denizolgun died in 2016 and was replaced as leader of the movement by his nephew (and Tunahan’s great-grandchildren) Alihan Kuriş, a businessman and architect.

Far from being a marginal “cult,” the Süleymancılar is part of mainline Islam in Turkey and internationally. However, any group trying to convert Russian Orthodox believers is a “destructive cult” in the eyes of Russian anti-cultists, and its leaders and members may easily go to jail.

Labelling the Movement of Conscientious Objectors as “Foreign Agent”

[EBCO – BEOC](#) (30.06.2023) - The European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO), War Resisters' International (WRI), the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) and Connection e.V. (Germany) strongly condemn the listing of the Russian Movement of Conscientious Objectors as “Foreign Agent” as of June 23rd 2023. This action is another blatant human rights violation, a fundamentally discriminatory application of law that contradicts universally accepted human rights and freedoms.

The Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation accuses the Movement of Conscientious Objectors of disseminating supposedly false information about the government's actions, decisions, and policies, in addition to opposing Russia's military actions in Ukraine. For the current government of the Russian Federation these allegations are sufficient to warrant the stigmatisation of the organisation.

The four organisations urge Russia to stop stigmatising human rights organisations and human rights defenders, and immediately and unconditionally release all those hundreds of soldiers and mobilised civilians who object to engage in the war and are illegally detained and even ill-treated.

The right to conscientious objection to military service is inherent in the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, guaranteed under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which is non-derogable even in a time of public emergency, as stated in Article 4(2) of ICCPR.

Conscientious objection is a tangible contribution to peace; therefore, the protection of this human right is even more crucial in wartime.

Despite these increased threats, the Russian Movement of Conscientious Objectors remains committed to supporting those who resist war and forced conscription and informing the global community about their ongoing work and challenges. This situation underlines the importance of continued support in these challenging times, through raising awareness, networking, outreach opportunities and fundraising (<https://stoparmy.org/en>).

Strongly condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the four organisations call Russia and Ukraine to safeguard the right to conscientious objection to military service, fully complying with the European and international standards, amongst others the standards set by the European Court of Human Rights.

The four organisations also denounce all the cases of forced and even violent recruitment to the armies in Russia and Ukraine and call these two countries to stop to persecute conscientious objectors, deserters and non-violent anti-war protestors.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest June 01-15

15.06.2023 - Jehovah's Witness approved sentence in Kemerovo Region

SOVA - On June 14, 2023, the Kemerovo Regional Court upheld the verdict against Jehovah's Witness Sergei Ananin, convicted under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization).

On March 31, 2023, the Belovsky City Court of the Kemerovo Region sentenced him to six years in prison to be served in a penal colony. The believer was taken into custody in the courtroom. During the debate of the parties on March 21, the public prosecutor asked that Ananin be sentenced to eight years in prison.

[Continue reading...](#)

15.06.2023 - The Court of Appeal in Primorye Territory upheld the verdict against three believers from Lesozavodsk

JW - On June 14, 2023, the Primorskiy Territorial Court, chaired by Judge Svetlana Ustimenko, upheld the verdict against Yevgeniy Grinenko, Sergey Kobelev and Svetlana Yefremova for their faith – a 6-year suspended sentence for the men and 3 years of probation for the elderly woman.

In February 2022, the Lesozavodskiy District Court found three local residents guilty of extremism for talking about the Bible and attending peaceful religious meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses. The convicted persons have appealed the verdict. According to the defense, the believers did not commit any real crime, the court only proved that they belong to the denomination of Jehovah's Witnesses, which is not prohibited by any law.

[Continue reading...](#)

15.06.2023 - Legal concept of "extremist material" expanded in Russia

Bitter Winter - Courts will be allowed to consider "extremist" even documents or information not explicitly listed as such—and anything connected with "Fascism." From now on in Russia, if texts you distribute are officially listed as "extremist" you go to jail. But if your texts are not in the list of "extremist materials" you can go to jail as well. This is the consequence of amendments to the law on extremism approved by the State Duma (the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia) last month and by the Federation Council (the upper house) on June 7.

[Continue reading...](#)

13.06.2023 - In the Kuban, two Pentecostals were fined for participating in the activities of an undesirable organization

SOVA - In June 2023, it became known that on May 26, the Krasnoarmeisky District Court of the Краснодар Territory found Kirill and Ekaterina Ulitin, the son and daughter of pastor Nikolai Ulitin, guilty under Art. 20.33 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (participation in the activities of a foreign or international non-governmental organization, in respect of which a decision was made to recognize its activities as undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation) and fined each of them five thousand rubles.

Both of them in December 2021 took part in a pastoral conference in Ramenskoye, organized by representatives of the New Generation.

Recall that the father of Ekaterina and Kirill, pastor Nikolai Ulitin, is charged under a criminal article on organizing the activities of an organization whose activities are recognized as undesirable.

13.06.2023 - Russia, Transformation Center Church falsely accused of supporting "Ukrainian terrorists"

Bitter Winter - The U.S.-based organization led by Andrey Shapovalov inspires several Russian churches. It has been declared "undesirable."

On June 8, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Russia declared "undesirable" the Transformation Center Church International, a large nondenominational Slavic Evangelical community based in Seattle, Washington.

Shapovalov is an associate of Pastor Aleksey Ledyaev, the founder of the Latvian New Generation Church, whose Russian communities in Chelyabinsk, Moscow, Kemerovo, Novosibirsk, Krasnodar, and Sochi were raided by special forces on August 15, 2022, and whose pastors continue to be arrested and sentenced.

[Continue reading...](#)

09.06.2023 - The Court of Appeal in Tuva upheld the verdict against Anatoliy Senin, one of Jehovah's Witnesses — a 6-year suspended sentence

JW - On June 8, 2023, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tuva upheld the basic punishment for Anatoliy Senin, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, a 6-year suspended sentence, but removed restrictions on his attending mass events from the verdict.

On January 12, 2023, the Kyzylsky City Court found the believer guilty of organizing the activity of an extremist organization. Senin's "guilt" comes down to the fact that he "broadcasted video recordings of a religious content, encouraged the audience to pray, sing religious songs and study the Bible".

[Continue reading...](#)

06.06.2023 - Muslim Kotelnikov accused of "illegal" missionary work and violation of fire safety

SOVA - On June 5, 2023, cases were initiated against the local religious organization of Muslims in Kotelniki near Moscow under part of the law. 3 and 4 art. 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (carrying out by a religious organization of activities without indicating its official full name, including the release or distribution of literature, printed, audio and video materials without marking with the specified name or with incomplete or deliberately false marking as part of missionary activities; carrying out missionary activities in violation of requirements of the legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations) and Part 1 of Art. 20.4 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (violation of fire safety requirements).

[Continue reading...](#)

05.06.2023 - Residents of Sochi opposed the construction of the synagogue

SOVA - On May 4, 2023, it became known that residents of the Sochi microdistrict Bytkha began collecting signatures against the construction of a Jewish cultural center, which includes a synagogue. Opponents of the construction believe that this place should be a public garden.

According to the chairman of the Bytkha territorial public self-government, Olga Sadovskaya, the participants of the gathering spoke out against the construction of the synagogue on this site, at which it was decided to change the purpose of the site to "a square, a recreation area, create a square with a children's and sports ground . "

[Continue reading...](#)

02.06.2023 - A court in St. Petersburg sentenced three foreign citizens to expulsion for "illegal missionary work"

Sova - According to the court, they organized an underground school where they taught Islam to children and adults and tried to involve them in the Turkish organization Suleymancilar.

On May 24, 2023, it became known about the deportation of three foreign citizens from Russia, whom the Oktyabrsky District Court of St. Petersburg found guilty of "illegal missionary work."

The court found Turkish citizen Shaban Dincer, Azerbaijani citizen Fazli Agayev and Tajik citizen Sharofiddin Rakhmanov guilty under Part 5 of Art. 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (carrying out missionary activities in violation of the requirements of legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations, committed by a foreign citizen) and sentenced them to 30,000 rubles each and administrative expulsion from the country.

[Continue reading...](#)

02.06.2023 - In Komsomolsk-on-Amur six more searches were conducted at homes of Jehovah's Witnesses. Searches involved several families.

JW - On the evening of 25 May, 2023, searches were conducted at six addresses of residents of Komsomolsk-on-Amur who are Jehovah's Witnesses. Presumably, a criminal case was opened for their faith.

The searches started around 8 p.m. and lasted almost until midnight. The believers were communicating with each other via video conferencing at the time.

[Continue reading...](#)

02.06.2023 - The Orthodox were outraged by the exhibition of contemporary art in St. Petersburg

SOVA - On June 1, 2023, it became known that in St. Petersburg, a group of Orthodox believers opposed an exhibition of contemporary art at the Pig's Snout Gallery. They consider the exhibits presented there offensive to believers.

The statement against holding the exhibition is addressed to the Prosecutor General's Office, the Investigative Committee, the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and the Media of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as the head of the Safe Internet League Ekaterina Mizulina, the chairman of the Central Headquarters of the "Cultural Front of Russia" Nikolai Burlyaev, the chairman of the Federation Council Valentina Matvienko, a member of the committee Federation Council for Defense and Security Margarita Pavlova. As of June 1, the statement has been signed by more than 30 people.

[Continue reading...](#)

02.06.2023 - The Court of Appeal reduced the terms of imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses from Birobidzhan

SOVA - Valery Krieger, Sergei Shulyarenko, Alam Aliyev and Dmitry Zagulin were found guilty of involvement in the activities of a banned community.

On June 1, 2023, the Court of the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAO) considered appeals against the conviction of four Jehovah's Witnesses, which was pronounced on December 19, 2022 by the Birobidzhan District Court. The court of appeal upheld the guilty verdict, but reduced the terms of imprisonment for two believers.

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Transformation Center Church falsely accused of supporting “Ukrainian terrorists”

The U.S.-based organization led by Andrey Shapovalov inspires several Russian churches. It has been declared “undesirable.”

by Massimo Introvigne



Pastor Andrey Shapovalov. From Facebook.

Bitter Winter (13.06.2023) - On June 8, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Russia **declared “undesirable” the Transformation Center Church International**, a large nondenominational Slavic Evangelical community based in Seattle, Washington.

Shapovalov is an associate of Pastor Aleksey Ledyaev, the founder of the Latvian New Generation Church, whose Russian communities in Chelyabinsk, Moscow, Kemerovo, Novosibirsk, Krasnodar, and Sochi **were raided by special forces** on August 15, 2022, and whose pastors **continue to be arrested and sentenced**.

Being labeled “undesirable” was somewhat less dangerous than being considered “extremist” before the Ukrainian war, but things changed in 2022. Article 284.1 as amended in 2022 after the aggression war against Ukraine deals precisely with organizations that have not been labeled as “extremist” but as “undesirable.” Organizing, participating in, and even promoting or simply displaying symbols of undesirable organizations on social media are now crimes punished with jail or labor camp penalties.

According to the Prosecutor General, the Transformation Center Church and its influence on Russian pastors “poses a threat to the foundations of the constitutional order, the

defense capability and security of the state The organization has its representative offices in several parts of the Russian Federation."

The Prosecutor General claims that, "Under the guise of spreading religious teachings, the founder and head of the organization, US citizen Andrei Shapovalov, created a destructive association whose activities are aimed at suppressing the personality of followers in order to raise funds."

If this is the typical charge that Russian anti-cultists raise against organizations they label as "cults," the Transformation Church Center is accused, like New Generation, of much more serious crimes. The Prosecutor General states that it "collected, including on the territory of Russia, donations that were used to support the armed forces of Ukraine and Ukrainian terrorist organizations, as well as information coverage of anti-Russian actions around the world. The efforts of the association, in addition, are aimed at trying to change power in an unconstitutional way and change the spiritual and moral values of the Russian Federation."

For those who know the Transformation Church Center, the accusations of cooperating with "Ukrainian terrorist organizations" and trying to organize a coup are ridiculous. The truth is that any church or religion perceived as a competitor of the Russian Orthodox Church may be accused of operating to "change the spiritual and moral values of the Russian Federation," declared "undesirable," and liquidated.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest May 15-31

31.05.2023 - Two pastors charged with collaborating with an unwanted organization

SOVA - On May 31, 2023, the Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation announced the approval of the indictment in the case of pastors Nikolai Ulitin and Svyatoslav Yugov. They were charged under Part 3 of Art. 284.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (organization of the activities of an international non-governmental organization, in respect of which a decision has been made to recognize its activities as undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation) .

[Continue reading...](#)

30.05.2023 - "Would Jesus Christ have gone to kill in Ukraine?"

Forum 18 - Eduard Charov criticised Russia's invasion of Ukraine on social media, asking "Would Jesus Christ have gone to kill in Ukraine?". The FSB alerted the Prosecutor's Office. A Sverdlovsk Region court fined him for "discrediting" the Armed Forces and "inciting hatred" towards state authorities. A Moscow court fined Mariya Kunchenko for an Orthodox Easter Sunday protest, while a Kareliya court fined Yekaterina Kukharskaya for putting up stickers bearing the Sixth Commandment ("Thou shalt not kill"). Police, prosecutors' offices, and courts did not respond to Forum 18's questions.

[Continue reading...](#)

29.05.2023 - A case of insulting the feelings of believers was initiated against a resident of Volgograd for a video about the burning of the Koran

SOVA - Against a resident of Volgograd, who recorded a video about the burning of the Koran in front of a mosque, a criminal case was initiated for insulting religious feelings. The case was transferred to Chechnya for investigation.

On May 21, 2023, it became known that a criminal case had been opened under Part 2 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (public actions expressing clear disrespect for society and committed in order to insult the religious feelings of believers, committed in places specially designed for worship, other religious rites and ceremonies) in relation to a resident of Volgograd.

[Continue reading...](#)

29.05.2023 - In the Altai Territory, another Jehovah's Witness has been convicted for his faith. Court in Barnaul Gave Pavel Kazadaev a 3-Year suspended sentence

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/05/261315.html>

On May 26, 2023, Dmitriy Malikov, judge of the Industrial District Court of Barnaul, gave Pavel Kazadaev, 26, a 3-year suspended sentence with restriction of liberty for 6 months and a probation period of 2 years for participating in the peaceful worship of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Investigative Committee initiated a criminal case against the believer in May 2021. Two weeks later, the security forces conducted mass searches at the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Altai Territory, calling the special operation "Armageddon".

[Continue reading...](#)

25.05.2023 - The Primorye Territory Court slightly reduced the harsh terms of imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses convicted of extremism

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/05/250915.html>

On May 3, 2023, the Primorye Territorial Court reduced the terms of punishment for residents of Spassk-Dalniy convicted for their faith by 2 months. Three believers will go to a penal colony: Dmitriy Malevaniy for 6 years 10 months, Aleksey Trofimov for 6 years 4 months and Olga Panyuta for 4 years 4 months. The suspended sentence for Olga Opaleva will be 4 years and 10 months.

[Continue reading...](#)

23.05.2023 - New criminal case for faith in Crimea. Home of Jehovah's Witnesses raided in Feodosia

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/05/231100.html>

On May 22, 2023, early in the morning a search was carried out at the home of a married couple in Feodosia. One of Jehovah's Witnesses, Maksim Zinchenko, 31, was detained and taken to Sevastopol.

The search, which took place from 06:30 to 10:00 am, was led by investigator Nikolay Pogorelov. The task force consisted of more than 10 people, five of whom were armed. The law enforcement officers ordered the hosts and the married couple who were visiting them to lie down on the floor. The investigator suggested that Zinchenko's wife cooperate with the investigation, intimidating her with a long prison term for her husband and a ban on visiting him. Electronic devices were confiscated from the believers. The detention of Maksim Zinchenko was preceded by a long period of surveillance.

Despite condemnation from the global community, the Russian authorities continue to prosecute Jehovah's Witnesses. In Crimea, 13 criminal cases for faith were initiated, 12 believers were sentenced to imprisonment in penal colonies.

19.05.2023 - After searches at the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Tolyatti two criminal cases were initiated for their faith

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/05/191138.html>

On May 16, 2023, in Tolyatti, officers of the Investigative Committee and the FSB broke into the homes of at least three families of believers. Two new criminal cases are known to have been initiated. Aleksandr Dolganov, 34, was placed under house arrest, and Sona Olopova, 36, signed a recognizance agreement.

Searches of the homes of the Dolganovs and of another believer started at about 6:30 in the morning and lasted more than two hours. At about the same time, a search took place at the home of Anatoliy and Sona Olopovs. Armed law enforcement officers confiscated electronic devices and personal records from the believers, and foreign passports were also taken from Dolganov and Olopova.

[Continue reading...](#)

18.05.2023 - A Court in Primorye refused to acquit three of Jehovah's Witnesses from the City of Ussuriysk. The verdict entered into force—A six-year suspended sentence

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/05/181711.html>

On May 18, 2023, the Primorsky Regional Court refused to grant the appeal of Sergey Korolchuk, Anton Chermnykh and Dmitry Tishchenko against a guilty verdict that imposed a six-year suspended sentence. The decision has entered into force, but the believers have the right to appeal it in the cassation court.

The court considered the following to be evidence of extremist activity: the defendants continued to "follow the teachings" of Jehovah's Witnesses by participating in worship services, "listening to sermons," and "performing religious songs." As noted in the appeal, these actions are not prohibited by the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation as socially dangerous acts but are guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation as fundamental human rights and freedoms.

[Continue reading...](#)

18.05.2023 - Muslim prayer house closed in Kotelniki

SOVA - On May 18, 2023, it became known that a prayer house located in a high-rise building was closed in Kotelniki near Moscow. Representatives of the police and the Investigative Committee sealed the premises, having previously checked the documents of those present. A criminal case was initiated against the owners of the premises under Part 1 of Art. 293 of the Criminal Code (negligence).

The local religious organization operating in the annex to the apartment building is officially registered. In 2021, they tried to bring her to administrative responsibility for the absence of a plate with the name of the organization, but the case was dismissed due to the absence of an offense.

[Continue reading...](#)

17.05.2023 - What about that meeting between Pope Francis and an exiled Russian Orthodox leader?

Getreligion - So, my gentle readers, please allow me to flash back to a recent news story that I intended to discuss, but travel got in the way. This was a story that may or may not have been important, but we really don't know because it centered on a private meeting between Pope Francis and a very symbolic Russian Orthodox leader.

Why to I say that Metropolitan Hilarion of Budapest is a highly "symbolic" Orthodox leader, especially at this point in the hellish conflict between Russia and Ukraine?

[Continue reading...](#)

16.05.2023 - Muslim community in Rostov region fined for "illegal" missionary work

Sova - In mid-May 2023, it became known that on April 27, the Justice of the Peace Court No. 7 of the Azov Judicial District of the Rostov Region fined the Muslim community for "illegal" missionary work in the amount of 30,000 rubles.

The local religious organization "Mahalla No. 2806" was found guilty under Part 3 of Art. 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (carrying out by a religious organization of activities without indicating its official full name, including the release or distribution of literature, printed, audio and video materials within the framework of missionary activities without marking with the specified name or with incomplete or deliberately false marking).

In the course of the prosecutor's inspection of compliance with the legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations, carried out jointly with the FSB, it was established that the imam of this organization used the literature of the Turkish religious organization "Suleimanji".

16.05.2023 - In the Murmansk region, the court sentenced two Jehovah's Witnesses

SOVA - The court fined Yunona Ilyasova and Aleksey Eliseev from Snezhnogorsk, finding them guilty under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code.

On May 15, 2023, the Polyarny District Court of the Murmansk Region passed a sentence on Jehovah's Witnesses Alexei Eliseev and Yunona Ilyasova, accused under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization). The court found the residents of Snezhnogorsk guilty and fined them 450 and 400 thousand rubles, respectively.

[Continue reading...](#)

The Russian human rights community will persevere

By Aaron Rhodes and Peter Zoehrer

[The Messenger](#) (18.05.2023) - The SOVA Center for Information and Analysis in Moscow will be "liquidated" by request of the Russian Ministry of Justice, following approval by the Moscow City Court, the group [announced](#) on April 27. The grounds for the decision are transparently arbitrary — the claim that the group violated the law by organizing events outside Moscow, where it is legally registered.

Dissolution would be a disproportionate punishment for such a violation. No one is supposed to believe this is anything but brute repression.

That is bad for Russians, whose access to information that is not state-controlled is being systematically erased. It also is bad for a world already severely disrupted by the effects of Russia's war on Ukraine, a world where religious freedom is increasingly threatened, and where the international campaign for religious freedom and minority rights is more important than ever, for Americans and people everywhere.

The closure comes as no surprise. Russian authorities have already shuttered most other major human rights organizations, including [Memorial](#), which was formed to document the crimes of Stalinism and took on domestic human rights monitoring, and the [Moscow Helsinki Group](#). Established in 1976, the Moscow Helsinki Group inspired a regional, civil society human rights movement and defined the non-political, objective approach to documenting human rights abuses that spread around the world. Keeping clear of opposition political projects, the group sought to assist the Soviet government comply with the human rights standards it had accepted by signing the [Helsinki Final Act](#).

Physics Nobel Laureate Andrei Sakharov [wrote that](#) human rights practice should be informed by nonviolence, transparency, respect for law and a “conscientious attitude toward information.” Human rights work needed to be independent of any political agenda in order to expose the truth credibly. SOVA has followed the same principles, conducting “informational and research work.” Like many of the leaders of the Soviet human rights movement, founder Alexander Verkhovsky has a scientific orientation, educated in applied mathematics. SOVA’s mandate follows his research interests in political extremism, nationalism, xenophobia, and religion and politics. But while the center’s work adhered to a scientific ethos, political developments increasingly made it impossible to avoid condemnation of repressive policies. Vaguely worded Russian anti-extremism legislation has been used to persecute political dissidents like Aleksei Navalny, [according to](#) the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The main targets of Russia’s anti-extremism policies typically have been Muslims, ranging from fundamentalist groups like [Hizb ut-Tahrir](#) to the missionary movement [Tablighi Jamaat](#) to readers of the texts of Turkish theologian Said Nursi. Since a wave of anti-government protests in 2011, however, the Russian government has engaged in a wider-ranging crackdown on non-Muslim denominations, including those of whom the Russian Orthodox Church has traditionally disapproved, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Scientologists, and the breakaway Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church. The Jehovah’s Witnesses were completely [banned](#) in 2017, making it illegal for 170,000 people to practice their faith, and members are regularly jailed.

Verkhovsky maintained a balanced, moderate position on the legislation, [telling](#) an audience at the Wilson Center in Washington in 2013 that he hoped for “a consensus that the legislation as written is counterproductive for all.” But he thinks the decision finally to dissolve SOVA could have resulted from criticism that became more overt as policies became more destructive. SOVA’s concerns for the rights of religious minorities became incompatible with an increasingly important emphasis on “traditionality,” spearheaded by Russian Orthodox [Patriarch Kirill](#) and Eurasianists like [Aleksandr Dugin](#).

Information on violent ultra-nationalism may have been interesting to functionaries in the early stages of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime, but it posed problems for authorities as those tendencies merged into state ideology. Nonetheless, Verkhovsky believes SOVA’s nonpolitical approach, and adherence to scientific standards, allowed the organization to have some positive impact on Russian policy. With no experimental controls, it is hard to measure the general impact of any human rights organization; we don’t know what would have happened in their absence. Russian authorities are cracking down on monitoring and advocacy, and abuses are likely to increase behind a wall of secrecy, in a state with no balance of power. Few will be there to document them, but we will then know the degree to which such organizations constrained the government from violating basic rights.

The moral response to Soviet totalitarianism among Russian and other Soviet intellectuals taught us how to monitor and advocate for human rights. The response to Russia’s current assault on civil society also could provide models, and hold lessons. Will

it mean the end of independent efforts to monitor state policies in the light of universal standards for safeguarding individual rights and freedoms? Activists say no, that they will doggedly continue their work; institutions may be banned, but individual efforts are more resistant to repression. Methods will be developed, as clever as the underground [samizdat human rights reports](#) of the Soviet era that helped the international community and the Soviet people understand, on the basis of evidence, the brutality of communist rule.

These are dark days for Russians who have sought life in a democratic, tolerant state respecting human rights. But people like Verkhovsky are unlikely to relinquish their efforts on behalf of the freedoms and security of Russian citizens, and people everywhere.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest May 01-15

15.05.2023 - The eviction of Vissarion's followers began in the Krasnoyarsk Territory

SOVA - On May 11, 2023, it became known about the beginning of the eviction of the followers of the Church of the Last Testament from their homes in the Kuraginsky district of the Krasnoyarsk Territory. The bailiffs demanded that two families living on the Svetly Ruchey farm should demolish their houses and outbuildings on their own, otherwise, after May 15, this will be done forcibly.

[Continue reading...](#)

15.05.2023 - Buddha's birthday declared a national holiday in Kalmykia

On May 11, 2023, the head of Kalmykia, Batu Khasikov, signed a decree declaring Shakyamuni Buddha's birthday a national holiday. Previously, this holiday was declared a non-working day in the republic for several years.

In 2023, Shakyamuni Buddha's birthday falls on June 4th. As it is Sunday, the holiday is moved to Monday, June 5th.

12.05.2023 - Criminal case opened in Chuvashia against Jehovah's Witness

SOVA - On May 11, 2023, it became known that in Chuvashia the investigating authorities opened a criminal case under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization) in relation to a local resident. His name is not called.

According to the investigation, since July 2019, he "carried out preaching activities, expressed in conducting conversations and teaching the religious teachings of the

indicated extremist organization, convincing the followers of the religious teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses and their superiority over representatives of other religions, involving new participants in the activities of the said organization".

[Continue reading...](#)

12.05.2023 - Abakan resident sentenced in case of insulting the feelings of believers

A resident of Khakassia was sentenced to compulsory labor under Art. 148 of the Criminal Code for publishing pictures about Christianity on a social network.

On May 11, 2023, the main investigative department of the Russian Investigative Committee for the Krasnoyarsk Territory and the Republic of Khakassia reported that a court in Abakan had sentenced a 22-year-old local resident accused under Part 1 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (insulting the religious feelings of believers). He was sentenced to 160 hours of compulsory work.

Probably, we are talking about Yevgeny Baturin, whose case was originally received by the judicial district of Justice of the Peace No. 4 of Abakan, but on March 3, 2023, it was transferred under the jurisdiction of another judge (we were unable to establish which court).

[Continue reading...](#)

12.05.2023 - Priest who changed prayer for victory is defrocked

On May 11, 2023, it became known about the decision to sack from the rank of cleric of the Moscow church of the Holy Apostle Andrew the First-Called in Lublin, Priest John Koval, who was previously suspended from service for replacing the word "victory" with the word "peace" in the "Prayer for Holy Russia" prescribed by the patriarch.

Archpriest Vladislav Tsylin, Deputy Chairman of the Church Court, explained that the basis for the deprivation of Fr. John the rank became the 25th canon of the Holy Apostles, which prohibits perjury - in this case it consisted in violating the oath that the priest gives at ordination, pledging to fulfill the orders of the hierarchy: "His fundamental refusal to obey the hierarchy - this can be used to designate the main basis for the decision on his case".

The decision of the church court has not yet been approved by the patriarch.

11.05.2023 - The Appeal Court in Blagoveshchensk upheld the sentencing of five Jehovah's Witnesses to a penal colony for more than 6 years for their beliefs

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2023/05/111527.html>

On May 11, 2023, the panel of judges of the Amur Regional Court did not grant the appeal of **Sergey Afanasiyev, Sergey Kardakov, Sergey Yermilov, Anton Olshevskiy and Adam Svarichevskiy** against the decision of the court of first instance,

which equated peaceful religious activity with extremism. The verdict has entered into force.

Earlier, Daria Varkalevich, judge of the Blagoveshchensk City Court of the Amur Region, sentenced Sergey Afanasiyev to 6.5 years, Sergey Kardakov to 6 years and 4 months, Sergey Yermilov, Anton Olshevskiy and Adam Svarichevskiy to 6 years and 3 months in prison.

[Continue reading...](#)

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10.05.2023 - The US Commission on International Religious Freedom presented a list of those who suffered for freedom of religion

SOVA - On May 5, 2023, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released the List of Victims Affected for Freedom of Religion or Belief. The list includes 409 people from Russia. There are more than 2,000 people on the list.

Among the Russians included in this list are Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims (including followers of Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, and other organizations banned in Russia) who have suffered for their beliefs: those held in custody, placed under house arrest, or under in prison. In addition, the list includes representatives of Protestant communities that disappeared after the outbreak of hostilities on the territory of Ukraine.

[Continue reading...](#)

10.05.2023 - Seven-year suspended sentence for reading the Bible with friends. Court Sentences Ivan Shulyuk, one of Jehovah's Witnesses from Nazarovo.

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2023/05/100922.html>

On May 10, 2023, Lev Afanasyev, judge of the Nazarovsky City Court of the Krasnoyarsk Territory, gave **Ivan Shulyuk** a 7-year suspended sentence with 4-year probation. The court deemed discussing the Bible, praying and singing religious songs among friends as organizing the activity of an extremist organization.

The prosecution of Ivan Shulyuk for his faith began on June 18, 2020, when law enforcement officers raided the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Nazarovo. He said: "I was subjected to a degrading procedure of search, arrest and confinement in a detention center. I was repeatedly transported in a tiny metal chamber within the prison van in the heat, kept and moved about in handcuffs, although I do not pose any threat to society.

[Continue reading...](#)

05.05.2023 - Case of Jehovah's Witnesses filed in court in Samara

SOVA - On April 20, 2023, the Samara District Court of Samara received the case of Jehovah's Witnesses **Denis Kuzyanin, Sergei Polosenko, Nikolai Vasilyev, and**

Aram Danielyan. They are accused under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization). According to investigators, the defendants resumed and continued the activities of the Volzhskaya cell, which was part of the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, from December 2020 to December 2021.

[Continue reading...](#)

05.05.2023 - The police checked the flag with the face of Christ for insulting religious feelings

Sova - On May 1, 2023, public utilities demanded that the flag with the face of Christ installed for the May holidays be removed from the balcony of one of the houses on Kutuzovsky Prospekt in Moscow. The tenants of the apartment refused to do so, so the public utilities called the police. The police seized the flag and sent it for examination to find out if it offended the feelings of believers.

In response to the request of the flag owners to return the confiscated flag, the police advised to obtain permission from the mayor's office to install banners on their own balcony.

After discussing the incident in social networks and the media, the flag was returned, apparently having come to the conclusion that the Savior Not Made by Hands does not offend the feelings of believers.

04.05.2023 - Liquidating the SOVA Center: The Official End of Religious Freedom in Russia

Bitter winter - The Moscow City Court decision of April 27 "liquidating" the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, a leading Russian NGO monitoring violations of freedom of religion or belief, is one of the saddest news coming from Russia in recent times. We are all indebted to SOVA, not only for information not available anywhere else, but also for in-depth analyses explaining why the Putin regime behaves as it does in its assault against religious liberty. SOVA has announced that it will appeal, but it seems unlikely that a politically motivated decision may be overturned.

[Continue reading...](#)

02.05.2023 - Residents of Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug demand to check the journalist for insulting the feelings of believers

Sova - On May 1, 2023, it became known that several residents of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug applied to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Nizhnevartovsk and Surgut with a request to check journalist Konstantin Shcherbina for insulting religious feelings.

The reason for the appeal was a photograph published by him on VKontakte, in which Shcherbina is sitting on a bench next to a wooden crucifix. Shortly after the publication, a

similar wooden sculpture was found in a trash can in one of the districts of Nizhnevartovsk. The police began searching for the person who had thrown away the crucifix.

The journalist himself said that the sculpture belonged to his deceased neighbor, whose belongings could not be disposed of for a year and a half. According to Shcherbina, the priest who examined the sculpture said that it depicts not Christ, but, possibly, a crucified robber, is not a religious shrine and can be chopped up for firewood.

01.05.2023 - The Court denied Aleksandr Nikolayev early release from the penal colony

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2023/05/011414.html>

On April 27, 2023, the Apsheronsky District Court of the Krasnodar Territory denied **Aleksandr Nikolayev** early release from the penal colony. His release is planned for the end of September 2023.

In December 2021, the Abinsky District Court sentenced Aleksandr Nikolayev, a father of many children, to 2.5 years in prison for participating in an online meeting for worship in which he read a passage from the Bible aloud. The believer spent 13 months in pre-trial detention and since February 2023 he has been in a penal colony.

In the Khadyzhensk penal colony, Nikolayev was provoked when one of the officers tried to rip off the badge from his uniform, the absence of which is usually viewed as breaking the rules.

Aleksandr does not lose heart and is grateful for letters of support from different countries: Russia, Germany, France, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

[Continue reading...](#)

Liquidating the SOVA Center: the official end of religious freedom in Russia

By destroying the leading organization monitoring religious liberty violations, the Putin regime can no longer pretend that relics of freedom of religion remain in Russia.

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (04.05.2023) - The Moscow City Court decision of April 27 "liquidating" the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, a leading Russian NGO monitoring violations of freedom of religion or belief, is one of the saddest news coming from Russia in recent times. We are all indebted to SOVA, not only for information not available anywhere else, but also for in-depth analyses explaining why the Putin regime behaves as it does in its assault against religious liberty. SOVA has announced that it will appeal, but it seems unlikely that a politically motivated decision may be overturned.

On the other hand, paradoxically the Moscow City Court decision makes the situation of religion in Russia clearer than it was before. To be honest, I was surprised that even after the war of aggression against Ukraine was started, SOVA was still allowed to continue its

precious work. I was even more surprised that, [as we reported in Bitter Winter](#), on September 28, 2022, SOVA's Olga Sibireva was allowed to travel to Warsaw and speak during the OSCE Human Dimension Meeting in Warsaw at a side event organized by the NGO CAP-LC, and supported by our magazine, on "Anti-Cult Ideology and FECRIS [the anti-cult European Federation whose Russian branch supports the invasion of Ukraine]: Dangers for Religious Freedom." I was a speaker in that event too, and found Sibireva's speech moderate, balanced, and well-informed. However, it comes out that her participation at the Warsaw event [is precisely one of the "crimes"](#) and the "gross and irreparable violations of the law" for which SOVA has been liquidated.

I had repeatedly asked myself why SOVA, and a few other "normal" voices, had not yet been suffocated in Russia. A tentative answer was that the Putin regime still wanted to pretend that different views on religion coexisted in Russia, from the lunatic ramblings of the Russian FECRIS and its leaders Alexander Dvorkin and Alexander Novopashin to SOVA's moderate attitude. There was no freedom of religion in Russia, but at least some limited spaces were left where one could not change the dire situation of religious liberty but could at least talk about it.

The most important of these spaces is now being closed. Russia is serving notice to the world that not only the practice of religious liberty, but even the possibility of discussing about freedom of religion or belief have been abrogated in the country. The Putin regime is now officially one of the pariah states, together with China and North Korea, where the repression of religious freedom is not even hidden.

Friends of freedom of religion throughout the world should mobilize for SOVA. They will probably not save it—but at least they should ask democratic states and international religious organizations to note the official declaration of end of any relic of freedom of religion in Russia. There is something that can and should be done, and talking is not enough. Magnitsky-type sanctions should hit the main architects of the repression of religious liberty in Russia, including Dvorkin and Novopashin. Interreligious and ecumenical dialogue, and invitation to international conferences, should cease for these religious leaders—bishops, starting from Patriarch Kirill, muftis, and Buddhist leaders—who aid and abet Putin's regime and its bloody religious repression (they also support the war of aggression against Ukraine). Business as usual with Russia can no longer continue in the religious field either.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest April 16 - 30

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

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

According to the artist, the organizers did not return her the money for participating in the exhibition, and the paintings suffered from a long contact of paint with the wall.

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

[Continue reading...](#)

An atheist prosecuted for offending the feelings of Christians

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

A resident of Moscow was fined for insulting Christian symbols

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

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

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

The defendant pleaded guilty and deleted the publication.

[Continue reading...](#)

Painter Veronica Polonskaya prosecuted for 'insulting' the feelings of believers

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

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

SOVA (18.04.2023) - On April 14, 2023, the Volodarsky Magistrate's Court of Bryansk fined the head of the religious organization "First Church of Evangelical Christian Baptists of Bryansk" Mikhail Lipsky for "illegal" missionary work. The court found him guilty under

Part 4 of Art. 5.26 of the Administrative Code (implementation of missionary activities in violation of the requirements of the legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations).

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

SOVA (17.04.2023) - On April 17, 2023, the Judicial Department of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation published statistical data on the application of Art. 5.26 of the Administrative Code (violation of legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations) in 2022.

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

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

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

[Continue reading...](#)

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

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

In Moscow, on the night of April 16, more than 600,000 people participated in the divine services. In total, "during the pre-holiday and holidays", according to the head of the Department of National Policy and Interregional Relations of Moscow Vitaly Suchkov, more than 2 million people visited the churches. The population of Russia is about 146 million.

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

[Continue reading...](#)

HRWF note:

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

In March-April, 12 Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to 76 years in prison in all

By Willy Fautré



By Willy Fautré

[European Times](#) (29.04.2023) - Not only Russian citizens disagreeing about Russia's war on Ukraine or asking Putin to stop the war are sentenced to heavy prison terms. Jehovah's Witnesses whose organization was banned by the Supreme Court in 2017 are arrested and sentenced to huge prison terms for merely practicing their faith in private. Moreover, SOVA CENTER, one of the main sources of information about human rights and religious freedom in Russia, is about to be liquidated. On 27 April 2023 Judge Vyacheslav Polyga of the Moscow City Court considered the request filed by Russia's Ministry of Justice to liquidate the Regional Public Association "Sova" and decided to approve it. The source of the documented cases hereafter is SOVA CENTER, a non-faith-based NGO.

A Jehovah's Witness sentenced to eight years in prison in Vladivostok



Dmitriy Barmakin and his wife Yelena. November 2021. Credit: <https://jw-russia.org>

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

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

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

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

According to the investigation, from July 2017 to November 2021, the accused continued to organize meetings, knowing about the national ban on the organization's activities. The investigation claimed that they also promoted the benefits of their religious teachings, distributed literature recognized as extremist, recruited local residents and "collected money under the guise of donations, and "for the purpose of conspiracy" used videoconferencing for communication.

Korolev, Kosyanenko and Kiramov were arrested on 9 November 2021 in Akhtubinsk and Znamensk, Astrakhan region.

In the Kemerovo region, a Jehovah's Witness was sentenced to six years in prison



Sergey Ananin near the court building. March 2021. Credit: <https://jw-russia.org>

On 31 March 2023, the Belovsky City Court of the Kemerovo region sentenced Jehovah's Witness [Sergei Ananin](#), accused under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization). He was sentenced to **six years** in a general regime colony. He was taken into custody in the courtroom.

During the debate of the parties on 21 March, the public prosecutor asked to sentence Ananin to eight years in prison.

According to the investigation, the accused held online gatherings from July 2017 to June 2020 to study materials sent from the "central office" of the organization and special literature "propaganda", although their religious organization had been banned across the whole country.

The criminal case was initiated in February 2021.

A court in Moscow sentenced five Jehovah's Witnesses



From left to right: Vitaliy Komarov, Ivan Chaykovskiy, Sergey Shatalov, Yuriy Chernyshev and Vardan Zakaryan on the day of the verdict. Credit: <https://jw-russia.org>

On 31 March 2023, the Babushkinsky District Court of Moscow issued a verdict in the case of five Jehovah's Witnesses. [Yuri Chernyshev, Ivan Tchaikovsky, Vitaly Komarov and Sergei Shatalov](#), were accused under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization) The court sentenced them to **six years and three months** in a general regime colony with a three-year ban on the management and participation in public organizations. As an additional punishment, the court sentenced them to one year of restriction of liberty. **Vardan Zakaryan** was found guilty by the court for violating Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (involvement in the activities of an extremist organization) and was sentenced to **four years and three months** in prison.

According to the investigation, the accused organized the work of the Management Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia banned in 2017. They shared religious literature promoting the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses with other people and "recruited" new participants from among residents of Moscow.

A Jehovah's Witness sentenced to six and a half years in Khabarovsk



Credit: <https://jw-russia.org>

On 27 March 2023, the Soviet-Havan City Court of the Khabarovsk Territory issued a verdict in the case of Jehovah's Witness [Alexei Ukhov](#), sentencing him to **six and a half years** in a penal colony under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization).

Ukhov was arrested and detained on 22 October 2020 after a series of searches of Jehovah's Witnesses in Soviet Harbor. On 9 July 2021, he was released from the pre-trial detention center on recognizance not to leave. His case went to court on 2 August 2021.

Six years in prison for a Jehovah's Witness in Krasnoyarsk



Yuriy Yakovlev in the courtroom, March 2023. Credit: <https://jw-russia.org>

On 17 March 2023, the Sosnovoborsk City Court of Krasnoyarsk Krai found Jehovah's Witness [Yuri Yakovlev](#) guilty of organizing the activities of an extremist organization (Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code) and sentenced him to **six years** in prison in a general regime colony.

According to the investigation, Yakovlev organized online gatherings of the banned organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, was engaged in "pastoral work" and led "preaching activities".

Yakovlev was arrested on 28 March 2022 for his involvement in the activities of an extremist organization due to the fact that in April 2017 the Supreme Court of Russia banned the Management Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and 395 local religious organizations said to be "extremist."

Pastor Moskvitin's Church headed for liquidation

By Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (12.04.2023) - [Bitter Winter reported in March](#) that the Kirovsky District Court of Omsk, Russia, sentenced Pastor Stanislav Moskvitin on March 12 to one and a half years to be spent in a penal colony. Moskvitin had been arrested on July 18, 2021. He is the pastor of the Apostolic Center Church "New Creation," which is part of the Russian Council of Christian Evangelical Churches.

As [Bitter Winter had reported](#) when the trial started in September 22, New Creation was founded in 2014 and registered in 2016. It is part of a network of Russian-speaking conservative Evangelical churches established in Russia, the Baltic States, and the United States. They supported in the past Putin and Patriarch Kirill's criticism of Western LGBT

activism. However, they were denounced as "cults" by the Russian Orthodox Church because they proselytize and convert Orthodox believers to their Protestant faith.

The verdict was based on Article 239, no.1, which punishes "harming the health" of Russian citizens. It was an interesting decision because it regarded "brainwashing" or "hypnotizing" followers as a health-damaging practice Moskvitin was guilty of. Brainwashing is regarded by a vast majority of scholars of religious movements [as a non-existing practice based on a pseudo-scientific theory](#), used as a tool to discriminate about unpopular minorities.

Russian media have now reported that the Ministry of Justice has conducted an inspection of Moskvitin's church and has come to the conclusion that it should be liquidated.

The inspection was carried out from March 15 to 17 with the help of anti-cult "experts," who concluded that the pastor systematically used "brainwashing" to "hypnotize" his followers.

Liquidation of the Apostolic Center Church "New Creation" has been proposed, and is expected to follow shortly, creating yet another casualty of the Russian anti-cult movement, Russia's blatant disregard for religious liberty, and "brainwashing," a theory that is not more scientific or respectable than flat earth hypotheses or other [debunked fallacies](#).

Moscow mosque plan pits Putin allies against each other

BY BRENDAN COLE

[NewsWeek](#) (22.04.2023) - Far from the front line of the war in Ukraine, battle lines of a different kind were drawn when residents of a Moscow district opposed a rumored proposal for a mosque for 60,000 worshippers by a lake cherished by Russian Orthodox believers.

In February, people in Kosino-Ukhtomsky started to voice anger at the complex, which would include a Muslim center and educational facilities. President of the predominantly Muslim Russian republic of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, fiercely loyal to Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#), called on anti-mosque demonstrators to "show your patriotism" by going to the trenches in Ukraine.

Prominent MMA fighters also weighed in opposing the mosque, while a video message by Chechens from the battlefield in Ukraine warned they could also wage war on the Orthodox protesters in Moscow.

After weeks of demonstrations, Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin announced on April 5 the mosque would be shifted to a much smaller site elsewhere. The decision got the backing of Patriarch Kirill, who as head of the Russian Orthodox Church and another close Putin ally, has given a [canonical justification](#) for the war in Ukraine.

The spat over the mosque, "is a part of an ongoing surge in religious tensions, including those among Russian servicemen and mercenaries fighting in Ukraine," Denys Brylov, head of the Kyiv-based European Centre for Strategic Analytics, told *Newsweek*. "This tension is largely caused by the influx of Muslim soldiers into the Russian army."

Along with Putin's arguments about [NATO](#) encroachment on Russia and "de-Nazification" as reasons for the war, Kremlin propaganda has also portrayed the full-scale invasion as a fight for what Putin has dubbed the "unity" of Orthodox Christian Russians and Ukrainians.

Muslims make up roughly a tenth of Russia's population and adherents of the faith fighting in Ukraine for Putin are dying in large numbers. Kadyrov's forces, which are part of Russia's National Guard, Rosgvardia, but directed by the strongman ruler, have a prominent profile thanks to their videos from the battlefield.

Olga Lautman, senior investigative researcher at the Institute for European Integrity, said there have been clashes between Kadyrov fighters and Russian soldiers.

"We've seen the tensions already over the past year escalate," she said.

Cannon fodder

Brylov said that as well as Russian Muslims, a growing number of army personnel are migrants from former Soviet states in Central Asia. This follows a decree by Putin last September making it easier for foreign citizens who sign up for the military to get Russian citizenship.

"These amendments aim to make up for the attrition in the Russian army at the expense of migrant workers," he said, adding that many migrants are tricked into signing military service contracts or sent to a war zone instead of being deported.

Two men of Tajik origin reportedly got into an argument with a lieutenant colonel on a military training ground in Russia's Belgorod region in October 2022. Unconfirmed reports said they responded to an Islamophobic insult by opening fire and killing up to 22 people.

"Non-Slavic and non-Orthodox citizens of the Russian Federation are only second-rank citizens and just cannon fodder for Putin's war on Ukraine," Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, told *Newsweek*.

"The question is how long the ethnic political leaders of the non-Orthodox and non-Slavic populations of the Russian Federation will go on tolerating the instrumentalization of their peoples in the never-ending carnage of the 'special military operation,'" Fautré added, referring to the Kremlin's term for its invasion of Ukraine.

Muslims joining the [Wagner Group](#) of mercenaries headed by [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#) are on the increase, Brylov said.

"Discrimination against Muslims is not uncommon," he said. "Although the number of Muslim servicemen grows, the Russian army does not provide Muslim servicemen with the necessary conditions for religious observance."

However, there have always been tensions within the Russian armed forces.

"A lengthy history of the brutal hazing of new recruits is one issue, retaliation against superiors is another," Robert Crews, history professor at [Stanford University](#) told *Newsweek*. "In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, who gets sent where, and with what resources has been a major fault line."

Initially, the [Russian military](#) turned to poorer regions with less political influence, which made it more difficult to avoid service.

"Non-Russian recruits, including those of Muslim background, have played a prominent role," he said. "But it's not clear that the Kremlin has treated them as cannon fodder because of their non-Russian ethnicity, though many observers have made this claim," Crews said.

Islamophobia

"Racism and Islamophobia are potentially unsettling elements in the Russian army, as in others in Europe and elsewhere," he said, although the Kremlin's position is that Islam is a "traditional" Russian religion, and that Muslims are essential to the war effort.

"Orthodox Christian symbols and imagery are dominant, but they do not exclude attention to Islam as a component part of a military that has been multi-confessional since at least the 16th century," Crews said.

Muslim leaders in Russia have backed Putin's invasion, repeating Orthodox Christian arguments about the "satanic" nature of the Western enemy. But troops of different faiths both being sold [the idea of a "Holy War"](#) could create a gap in logic that is tricky to bridge. Meanwhile, tensions can spill over between Muslim and non-Muslim personnel fighting for Moscow.

Brylov said that the idea that serving in the Russian armed forces is unacceptable, especially under contract, is spreading among some Russian Muslims, who may question the religious validation for the war.

"In the case of prolonged hostilities, lack of changes in the war zone, and, consequently, a growing number of dead Muslims, we can expect increasing dissatisfaction among Muslim servicemen," Brylov said.

After the war, a growing number of Muslim combat veterans will become more influential both in the Russian armed forces and among military and law enforcement agencies, he added.

There are Muslims fighting on both sides in the war, with adherents from Crimea and Azerbaijan among those who have joined the fight on the side of Ukraine. Anti-Russian Chechens received support from the Ukrainian authorities, which have recognized the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria—the name of the de facto independent Chechen state that existed in the 1990s—as being temporarily occupied by Russia.

Kadyrov, Prigozhin and military bloggers have all been critical of the Russian defense ministry, pointing to different views on how Moscow should fight the Ukraine war as Putin's efforts falter. Meanwhile, the dispute over the mosque in Moscow could be a prelude to tensions in Russian society after the war ends.

"Putin has been able to hold the different factions together through fear but over the past year, the Russian military continues to suffer these losses and humiliation on the front

lines, and you are seeing more and more factions fighting," Lautman told *Newsweek*. "And the fighting is spilling over publicly."

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest April 01-15

14.04.2023 - In Anapa, a pastor was sentenced to a year in prison for collaborating with the New Generation

Sova center - On April 13, 2023, it became known that the pastor of the religious group of Christians of the Evangelical faith "Christ the Savior" Nikolai Bogoslovsky was convicted. The Anapa City Court found him guilty under Part 1 of Art. 284.1 Participation in the activities of a foreign or international non-governmental organization, in respect of which a decision was made to recognize its activities as undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation, committed by a person subjected to administrative punishment for a similar act) and sentenced him to a year of imprisonment with a term of settlement colonies.

[Continue reading...](#)

14.04.2023 - A new case was opened in Tambov on participation in the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses

Sova Center - A 67-year-old Tambov resident became a suspect under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code.

On April 14, 2023, the investigative department of the Russian Investigative Committee for the Tambov Region announced that it had opened a criminal case under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (participation in the activities of an extremist organization) in relation to a 67-year-old Jehovah's Witness. His name is not called.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.04.2023 - Russia, Pastor Moskvitin's Church headed for liquidation

Bitter Winter - Bitter Winter reported in March that the Kirovsky District Court of Omsk, Russia, sentenced **Pastor Stanislav Moskvitin** on March 12 to one and a half years to be spent in a penal colony. Moskvitin had been arrested on July 18, 2021. He is the pastor of the Apostolic Center Church "New Creation," which is part of the Russian Council of Christian Evangelical Churches.

As Bitter Winter had reported when the trial started in September 22, New Creation was founded in 2014 and registered in 2016. It is part of a network of Russian-speaking conservative Evangelical churches established in Russia, the Baltic States, and the United

States. They supported in the past Putin and Patriarch Kirill's criticism of Western LGBT activism. However, they were denounced as "cults" by the Russian Orthodox Church because they proselytize and convert Orthodox believers to their Protestant faith.

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11.04.2023 - Raid on Jehovah's Witnesses in St. Petersburg. The Security Forces searched for everything with the words "God", "Jesus", "Faith"

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/04/110844.html>

On the evening of April 4, 2023, nine Jehovah's Witnesses in St. Petersburg were subjected to searches, six of them, men and women aged 40 to 68, were interrogated by the Investigative Committee throughout the night.

Around 20:00, groups of OMON fighters broke into the apartments of believers at several addresses in the south of the city. At that time, the hosts received guests. In one of the apartments, armed security forces in balaclavas, shouting "everyone on the floor", broke down the door.

[Continue reading...](#)

10.04.2023 - Rustam Seidkuliev served his sentence for his faith and was released from the penal Colony in Saratov

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/04/101437.html>

On April 7, 2023, **Rustam Seidkuliev** was released from a penal colony in the Saratov Region. As he walked out, he was met by his wife and dozens of friends who came to support the believer.

In January 2020, a criminal case was initiated against Rustam Seidkuliev under the article on participation in the activities of an extremist organization. On May 20, 2021, the Leninskiy District Court found him guilty and sentenced him to two and a half years in a general regime penal colony. Later, the Saratov Regional Court reduced this term by two months.

[Continue reading...](#)

10.04.2023 - In St. Petersburg, riot police did not allow Catholics to perform a ceremony near the temple

Sova center - In St. Petersburg, at the request of the security forces, the Catholic community on the eve of Easter was forced to conduct a ceremony of lighting a fire inside the temple, and not at the entrance to it, as they had done before.

On April 8, 2023, OMON fighters came to the Basilica of St. Catherine in St. Petersburg, where the Catholic community was going to hold a ritual of lighting a fire on the eve of the Easter service. The security forces demanded permission from the rector to hold an event at the entrance to the temple.

[Continue reading...](#)

10.04.2023 - Russia uses the UOC-MP and religion as weapons to incite social tension in Ukraine – ISW report

Risu - Russia falsely accuses Ukraine of infringing religious freedoms against the UOC-MP, while it itself has launched real religious purges in the occupied territories of Ukraine as part of a broader campaign of genocide against Ukrainians.

According to NV, this was stated in a new report by the Institute for the Study of War. The report analyzes in detail the religious repression that Russia has been carrying out throughout the occupied territory of Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022.

[Continue reading...](#)

08.04.2023 - Only 'compatriots' in war How plans for a new mosque in Moscow exposed the limits of Russia's religious pluralism

Meduza.io - In early February, residents of Moscow's Kosino-Ukhtomsky District started protesting in opposition to the rumored construction of a new mosque in their area. Over the weeks that followed, the demonstrations grew into a bizarre and ugly spectacle on which everyone from MMA fighters to Chechnya Governor Ramzan Kadyrov to Russian Orthodox Church head Patriarch Kirill felt compelled to weigh in. On April 5, Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin announced that the protesters would get their wish, and that a new site had been chosen for the mosque. The solution was sold as a win-win, but public figures from Dagestan and Chechnya say the incident triggered xenophobia that will leave Russia's Muslims worse off in the long run.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.04.2023 - Russians launch disinformation campaign aimed at inciting Muslims against Ukraine

Risu - The goal of this disinformation campaign is to incite inter-religious enmity and demonize Ukraine and Ukrainians in the eyes of Muslims. In addition, according to analysts, another goal of the disinformation campaign is to increase the level of mobilization among devout Muslims.

Experts from the Center for Countering Disinformation at the National Security and Defense Council have identified a disinformation campaign.

Telegram channels broadcasting pro-Kremlin rhetoric are spreading reports about "Nazi Ukrainians who hate other people's religions," particularly Islam.

The authors of these messages are attempting to convince readers that "Ukraine is a godless and satanic state" by spreading fake news about incidents such as the burning of the Quran.

[Continue reading...](#)

06.04.2023 - Lunkin R. Campaign against a religious minority: a dangerous game on the feelings of believers

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/docs/285.html>

In 2019, several articles in the information and analytical journal Religion and Law were devoted to Jehovah's Witnesses. Doctor of Political Science, Head of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Editor-in-Chief of the Modern Europe magazine Roman Lunkin, in his article analyzed in detail how the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia unfolded over the past 25 years.

[Continue reading...](#)

05.04.2023 - First jail term for religious-based opposition to war

Forum 18 - On 30 March, a Moscow court jailed 63-year-old Orthodox Christian Mikhail Simonov for 7 years for disseminating "false information" about the Russian armed forces on the basis of "political hatred". He had made two short social media posts condemning Russia's war against Ukraine, including: "We, Russia, have become godless. Forgive us, Lord!" The Investigative Committee and Prosecutor's Office did not respond on why they sought a long jail term for Simonov, who suffers from health problems. A Krasnodar Region court fined 86-year-old independent Orthodox Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov two months' average pension for a sermon.

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03.04.2023 - Court of Appeal in Kemerovo upheld the 6-year suspended sentence for Sergey Sushilnikov, a veteran of labor

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/04/031040.html>

On March 29, 2023, the Kemerovo Regional Court upheld the main part of the sentence for 65-year-old Sergey Sushilnikov - 6-year suspended sentence. At the same time, a number of additional restrictions were removed from the verdict, in particular, a ban on publishing on the Internet and attending public events.

"The court did not determine any consequences of my actions aimed at the peaceful practice of my faith in accordance with the Bible commandments, and did not mention them in the verdict," Sushilnikov emphasized at the appeal hearing. "The verdict does not include quotations of extremist statements, nor the dates, times and places of when they were made. On the contrary, it indicates that ... there are no such statements".

[Continue reading...](#)

03.04.2023 - Kremlin's Dismissal Of Kalmyk Religious leader last straw for Russia's Buddhists

EurasiaReview - The Kremlin's decision to oust the leader of the Kalmyk Buddhists both because of his anti-war comments and in order to curry favor with China has outraged many in the three Buddhist nations of the Russian Federation, the Kalmyks, the Buryats and the Tuvins.

And it is driving the most radical in all three to send men to fight Russian force in Ukraine and to organize in the diaspora and at home to defend their religion and seek independence for their nations, according to Daavr Dorzhin of the Congress of the Oyrat-Kalmyk People and the League of Free Nations

[Continue reading...](#)

First jail term for religious-based opposition to war

By Victoria Arnold

Forum 18 (05.04.2023) - On 30 March, a Moscow court jailed 63-year-old Orthodox Christian Mikhail Simonov for 7 years for disseminating "false information" about the Russian armed forces on the basis of "political hatred". He had made two short social media posts condemning Russia's war against Ukraine, including: "We, Russia, have become godless. Forgive us, Lord!" The Investigative Committee and Prosecutor's Office did not respond on why they sought a long jail term for Simonov, who suffers from health problems. A Krasnodar Region court fined 86-year-old independent Orthodox Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov two months' average pension for a sermon.

A 63-year-old Russian Orthodox Christian has become the first person to be sentenced to imprisonment for expressing his opposition to Russia's war in Ukraine in religious terms. Investigators accused Mikhail Simonov of disseminating "false information" about the Russian armed forces on the basis of "political hatred", because of two social media posts in which he condemned Russian attacks on the Ukrainian cities of Kyiv and Mariupol.

"Killing children and women, on Channel One [television] we sing songs. We, Russia, have become godless [bezbozhniki]. Forgive us, Lord!" Simonov wrote on social media in a March 2022 post which would form the basis for his prosecution (see below)

On 30 March 2023, a Moscow court handed Simonov a 7-year prison term, to be followed by a 4-year ban on specific activities related to internet use. At present, he remains in custody at a Moscow detention centre awaiting a possible appeal (see below).

Simonov was prosecuted under Criminal Code Article 207.3, which President Vladimir Putin signed into law in March 2022, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On 28 March 2023, amendments to the Criminal Code increased maximum penalties under this Article and under Article 280.3 (repeat "discreditation" of the Russian armed forces, adopted at the same time) (see below).

Forum 18 asked the Federal Investigative Committee and its Moscow branch, as well as Moscow City Prosecutor's Office, in what way Simonov's comments could be construed as motivated by hatred of a political or social group, and why it was necessary to have a 63-year-old man with health problems placed in detention. Forum 18 also asked Moscow City Prosecutor's Office why prosecutors had requested such a long prison sentence. Forum 18 received no reply from any of these agencies (see below).

Simonov has been in Investigation Prison No. 5 in Moscow since November 2022. He told the court that he has suffered from sharply fluctuating blood pressure and headaches, and has lost consciousness on several occasions during his time in detention. According to his lawyer, Simonov is suffering from coronary heart disease and hypertension. Forum 18 asked the Investigation Prison whether it is keeping him under medical supervision and whether he had access to all necessary medications. Forum 18 received no reply (see below).

Two other individuals – both Orthodox Christians – are on trial for their religious-based opposition to Russia's renewed war against Ukraine (see below).

Russians who object to the war – including small numbers who do so on religious grounds or who express their opposition in religious terms – also [continue to face prosecution under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3](#) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation").

Recently, these have included 86-year-old Viktor Pivovarov, an Archbishop in an independent Orthodox church not affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. A court in Krasnodar Region fined him one month's average local wage or more than two months' average local pension on 24 March for an anti-war sermon in his church (see below).

Forum 18 asked the Krasnodar Region branch of the Interior Ministry and the joint court press service for Krasnodar Region to clarify which statements of Pivovarov's could be considered "discreditation" of the Russian armed forces and why. The Interior Ministry press office refused to answer Forum 18's questions as "the case is with the court". Forum 18 received no reply from the court (see below).

Two criminal trials continue

Two other people are currently on trial on criminal charges for opposing the war from a religious perspective, both Orthodox Christians:

- Father Ioann Kurmoyarov is in custody at St Petersburg's Kresty-2 prison. He belongs to a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia which is not in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate, and has also been charged under Article 207.3 – his next hearing is [due to take place on 10 April](#) at the city's Kalinin District Court;
- Musician and teacher Anna Chagina's trial under Article 280.3 is [due to resume on 11 April](#) at Soviet District Court in Tomsk. Chagina's first (administrative) conviction was for displaying a poster reading "Blessed are the peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)" at an anti-war protest in Tomsk in March 2022, just two days after the new offence of "discreditation" came into force. "Many times after [the arrest for the poster], I inwardly turned to these words of Christ and realised that peacemaking begins with what is in a person's heart," Chagina told Forum 18. "Happiness is when you become one who can reconcile those

who are warring. One who has come to terms with oneself, with people, with Life. When you carry light and joy in yourself, which spread to other people" Chagina remains at home under specific restrictions, including a night-time curfew, and must wear an electronic tag.

The first person to be criminally convicted for opposing the war on religious grounds was Fr Nikandr Pinchuk (a member of the same branch of ROCOR as Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov). A Sverdlovsk Region court [found him guilty in October 2022](#) under Article 280.3 for a social media post from March 2022 which described Russian troops as "the horde of the Antichrist", and Ukrainians as "the Christian army which .. will not allow it to capture the south of Ukraine", while praising the defenders who had been "holding the city of Mary, Mariupol, for more than a month". The court fined him 100,000 Roubles, two months' average local wage.

[READ MORE](#)

Photo: Mikhail Simonov being led into Moscow's Timiryazevsky District Court, 30 March 2023 (Antonina Favorskaya/SOTAvision)

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest March 16 -31

31.03.2023 - Jehovah's Witness sentenced to six years in prison in Kemerovo Region

Sova Center - Sergei Ananin was convicted under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code.

On March 31, 2023, the Belovsky City Court of the Kemerovo Region passed a sentence on Jehovah's Witness Sergei Ananin, charged under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization). He was sentenced to six years in prison to be served in a penal colony. The believer was taken into custody in the courtroom.

During the debate of the parties on March 21, the public prosecutor asked that Ananin be sentenced to eight years in prison.

[Continue reading...](#)

30.03.2023 - A criminal case was opened against a resident of St. Petersburg for insulting the feelings of believers

Sova Center - On March 30, 2023, the administration of the Investigative Committee for St. Petersburg announced the initiation of a criminal case against a 43-year-old local resident under Part 1 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (public actions expressing clear disrespect for society and committed in order to offend the religious feelings of believers). Earlier, a case was opened against him under Part 1 of Art. 318 of the Criminal Code (use of violence against a representative of authority).

The reason for the criminal prosecution was an incident that occurred at the end of March. A Petersburg, moving around the city by car, stopped at a pedestrian crossing, approached another driver and, during a conversation with him, spoke negatively about "Russians" and "Christians", calling them "fascists" because of the armed actions on the territory of Ukraine. The conversation was recorded on a video recorder; on March 28, the second driver posted the recording on the Internet.

[Continue reading...](#)

28.03.2023 - Jehovah's Witnesses detained in Leningrad Region

Sova Center - In February 2023, as part of a new case under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code, six suspects were detained, four of them were sent to a pre-trial detention center. In March, five more suspects appeared in the case.

On March 23, 2023, a new wave of searches took place at the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kingisepp, Leningrad Region. After interrogations, five believers were detained: **Igor Shevlyuga, Miroslav Sabodash, Constance Vovk, Tatyana Stepanova and Alexander Vaganov**. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses themselves, four - Sabodash, Vovk, Stepanova and Vaganov - were ordered by the court to ban certain actions; what measure of restraint was chosen by Shevlyuga is not specified.

[Continue reading...](#)

27.03.2023 - Court in Sovetskaya Gavan sentenced one of Jehovah's Witnesses Aleksey Ukhov to six and a half years of real imprisonment for reading the Bible

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/03/271118.html>

On March 27, 2023, Victoriya Anokhina, judge of the Sovetskaya Gavan City Court of the Khabarovsk Territory, sentenced **Aleksey Ukhov** to 6.5 years in a penal colony for believing in Jehovah God. He was taken into custody in the courtroom.

The verdict has not entered into force and can be appealed. The believer insists on his complete innocence. "I want to maintain my reputation as a person worthy of respect, who values his word, and also values the honor of being a Jehovah's Witness. For me, this is very important," said Aleksey Ukhov, addressing the court with the last word.

[Continue reading...](#)

23.03.2023 - A second appeal in Chelyabinsk softened the sentence of Lyudmila Salikova, 71.

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/03/231358.html>

On March 23, 2023, **Lyudmila Salikova** reappeared before the Chelyabinsk Regional Court, which changed her sentence, reclassifying the charge from organizing the activities of an extremist organization to participating in it and reducing her suspended sentence to 2.5 years with a probationary period of 3 years.

Lyudmila Salikova from Snezhinsk has been prosecuted for her faith since the fall of 2020. She ended up in the dock for "taking part in the religious meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses, having conversations about the creeds of Jehovah's Witnesses." By such actions, according to the investigation, she organized the activities of an extremist organization. In January 2022, Lyudmila Salikova was sentenced to 6 years of suspended sentence, and the appeal upheld this decision.

[Continue reading...](#)

22.03.2023 - ECtHR rules in favor of Baptist Ossevaarde

Sova center - On March 7, 2023, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the Ossevaarde v. Russia case . U.S. citizen Baptist Donald Jay Ossevaarde was fined in 2016 for "illegal" missionary work.

Together with his wife, they held Bible meetings at home in Orel, without notifying government agencies about the creation of a religious group. They invited people to meetings in person or left invitations in mailboxes.

The court found in the Ossevaarde case a violation of Art. 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) and Art. 14 (prohibition of discrimination) of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

[Continue reading...](#)

22.03.2023 - Russian Orthodox Church shares blame for 'crimes' in Ukraine, says ecumenical patriarch

Radio Free Europe - The spiritual head of the world's Orthodox Christians said on March 22 that Russia's Orthodox Church shared responsibility for the conflict in Ukraine. "The church and the state leadership in Russia cooperated in the crime of aggression and shared the responsibility for the resulting crimes, like the shocking abduction of the Ukrainian children," Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said at a conference in Vilnius. The comments are a rebuke of Russian Patriarch Kirill, whose blessing for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine has splintered the Orthodox Church. Russian authorities are using the church as an "instrument for their strategic objectives," Bartholomew said.

[Continue reading...](#)

20.03.2023 - The Cassation Court in Kemerovo did not change the sentence imposed on Yevgeniy Korotun from Seversk—seven years in prison for his religion

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/03/201434.html>

On March 16, 2023, the Eighth Cassation Court of General Jurisdiction definitively upheld the conviction of **Yevgeniy Korotun**, who is one of Jehovah's Witnesses. In January 2022, he was sentenced to seven years in prison, and in May of the same year, this decision was upheld by the appellate court.

Yevgeniy, a 52-year-old pensioner and father of a young child, has been behind bars for a total of about two and a half years. Now he is serving his sentence in a penal colony in Nizhny Tagil.

[Continue reading...](#)

20.03.2023 - Russia: Pastor Moskvitin sentenced to 1.5 years in penal colony for "brainwashing"

Bitter winter - On March 12, 2023, the Kirovsky District Court of Omsk, Russia, sentenced **Pastor Stanislav Moskvitin** to one and a half years to be spent in a penal colony. Moskvitin had been arrested on July 18, 2021. He is the pastor of the Apostolic Center Church "New Creation," which is part of the Russian Council of Christian Evangelical Churches.

[Continue reading...](#)

18.03.2023 - How religious freedom is eroding amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Christian post - Russia's persecution of religious groups has worsened during the war with Ukraine, according to experts who testified before the United States' top religious freedom advisory commission this week.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom hosted a virtual hearing to analyze Russia's religious freedom violations and recommend policy solutions. The commission is responsible for advising the U.S. Congress and the State Department about religious freedom across the globe.

[Continue reading...](#)

18.03.2023 -Two criminal trials to resume in April

Forum 18 - The criminal trial of Tomsk musician Anna Chagina on charges of again "discrediting" the Armed Forces resumes on 11 April. She was fined in 2022 for a poster reading "Blessed are the peacemakers". "Many times after [the arrest for the poster], I inwardly turned to these words of Christ and realised that peacemaking begins with what is in a person's heart," Chagina says. In St Petersburg, Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov's trial resumes on 10 April. He says he has been denied medical attention in prison, including from a cardiologist. New penalties for "false information" and "discreditation", also applying these actions to criticism of mercenaries, are due to come into force on 28 March.

[Continue reading...](#)

17.03.2023 - The Court sentenced Yuriy Yakovlev, a 56-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Sosnovoborsk, to 6 years and 2 months in a penal colony

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/03/171510.html>

On March 17, 2023, the Sosnovoborsk City Court of the Krasnoyarsk Territory found Yuriy Yakovlev guilty of extremism for holding peaceful religious services online. The verdict can be appealed.

In March 2022, a criminal case was initiated against the believer, and his house was searched. After that, **Yuriy Yakovlev** was placed in a pre-trial detention center, where remains until now. Shortly before the start of the prosecution, his elderly mother, who needed care, moved in with the believer. After her son's arrest, her condition deteriorated.

[Continue reading...](#)

Churches collect 1 billion rubles (10 million EUR) for 'people in need' in occupied territories

The collaboration between religious groups and their own state in the invasion of a neighbouring country raises moral and theological questions

Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers



Oleg Goncharov: the state is not pressuring the religions of the Russian Federation, they themselves collected a billion rubles in total for the victims of war (Credit: IRP)

HRWF (21.03.2023) - On 28 February 2023, a webinar titled **"Religious Factor in Modern Political and Economic Life of Europe"** was held by the **Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences**, [INION RAN](#), and the **Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow**.

[According](#) to Roman Lunkin, Deputy Director of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, religious organizations of the Russian Federation freely decided to collect funds "to help those in need during the Special Military Operation in Ukraine," provide social and humanitarian assistance.

Social and humanitarian assistance in Russian-occupied territories

In an article published on 1 March 2023 by the **Institute of Religion and Policy**, and titled **["Religions in the Russian Federation have raised a billion dollars for war victims"](#)**, Pastor Oleg Goncharov (Seventh-Day Adventist Church), Secretary General of the Russian Association for Religious Freedom and member of the Presidential Council, was quoted as saying:

"Basically, all associations focused on social assistance to those in need. Although there have been and are political statements from church leaders, everyone is united in the organization of humanitarian projects."

"While most of the donations and other assistance are collected by the Russian Orthodox Church, Evangelical Protestant Churches have also made a significant contribution. Protestants have begun to regularly support residents of Mariupol since April 2022, various churches have had projects in Donbass since 2014. At Christmas, clothes and gifts were distributed in Lugansk."

As Goncharov noted, he was impressed by the trip to [Lugansk](#) in December 2022, where Orthodox, Muslims, Protestants, Jews distributed food to children and the elderly together.

According to Goncharov, "The churches are working with the Ministry of Defense on this occasion."

Questions:

- **Who were the providers of one billion rubles?**
- **How were they collected?**
- **Should religious communities collaborate with the Ministry of Defence of their aggressor country?**
- **Isn't this some form of complicity and support to the invasion of a sovereign country?**

The "New Russian Territories" of the Russian Federation and Russian religions

Under cover of interreligious dialogue, the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill who fully support Putin's war on Ukraine are now involving other Russian churches and religious groups in the "New Territories" ideology and the colonization thereof.

This is obvious in the article ["New Territories of the Russian Federation were discussed by the bodies under the President of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate."](#) published on 1 March 2023 by the Institute of Religion and Policy:

"The meeting, which was chaired by DECR Chairman, Head of the Commission on International Cooperation, **Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk**, was attended by:

Deputy Head of the Office of the President of the Russian Federation for Internal Policy **Anatoly Vylegzhanin**;

Head of the Department for Interaction with Religious Organizations of the Office of the President of the Russian Federation for Internal Policy **Yevgeny Eremin**;

Advisor to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Archpriest **Nikolai Balashov**;

Representative of the Russian and New Nakhichevan Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church Priest **Gevorg Vardanyan**;

Chief Bishop of the Russian United Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals) **Sergei Ryakhovsky**;

Deputy Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation for International Affairs **Rushan Abbyasov**;

Deputy Archbishop of **Shafig Pshikhachev**;

Did Hambo Lama Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia **Dashi-Nima Sodnomdorzhiev**;

First Deputy Chairman of the Euro-Asian Division of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Christian Church **Oleg Goncharov**, as well as other members of the Commission and invited officials.

"New Territories"

Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov), Secretary of the Department of the Inter-Christian Relations, told the experience of religious organizations of the Russian Federation in providing humanitarian assistance to residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics, Zaporozhye and Kherson regions.

According to **Rushan Abbyasov**, he conveyed to the audience the words of greetings on behalf of the Chairman of the SAM of the Russian Federation and JIM **Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin**.

In the context of discussing the first topic of the meeting related to the provision of humanitarian assistance to residents of the **"new territories"** of Russia, Rushan Abbyasov said that "with the blessing of Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin, the organizations he heads are doing a lot of work in this direction, as well as **supporting our fighters on the front line and visit the wounded in hospitals.**"

Interreligious dialogue

Archpriest **Sergei Zvonarev**, Secretary of the SPRC for Far Abroad, Executive Secretary of the Commission on International Cooperation, made a presentation on the prospects for the participation of traditional religious organizations of the Russian Federation in **global interreligious meetings**.

When discussing issues of international cooperation, he noted the importance of public diplomacy, **Roushan Abbyasov** spoke about the contribution of the SAM of the Russian Federation and the JIM to the development of Russia's relations with the Islamic world, through the signing of Memoranda of Understanding, the implementation of joint humanitarian, cultural, religious and spiritual and educational projects.

Concluding the meeting, **Metropolitan Anthony** wished all those present blessed success in their future work."

Questions:

- **How can Russian Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists and others accept in their soul and conscience to endorse Russia's aggression of Ukraine, Russia's invasion and colonization of Ukrainian territories.**
- **How can they accept to work in the so-called 'New Territories' with the blessing of the ROC and the Kremlin?**
- **How long can Adventist, Evangelical, Muslim, Buddhist... organizations in Europe and America tolerate the justification of the war and occupation by their brothers and sisters in Russia.**



In the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, at a joint meeting on February 27, 2023, the bodies of the Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations under the President of the Russian Federation - the Commission on International Cooperation and the Interreligious Working Group for the Protection of Believers from Discrimination and Xenophobia discussed Russian "new territories" and work there, as reported by the [DECR](#).

500 religious buildings damaged and over 20 clerics murdered in Ukraine

Hearing about Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its implications for religious freedom

HRWF (20.03.2023) - Since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russian forces have committed numerous religious freedom and other related human rights violations in Ukraine, including the killing and torture of religious leaders and the destruction of countless houses of worship.

This is the general topic that was addressed by USCIRF (*), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and its guest speakers at the hearing it organized on March 15 from Washington to discuss **Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom**.

Russian officials have turned to antisemitic rhetoric and Holocaust distortion in order to try to justify the country's groundless invasion. In the areas of Ukraine that Russia has occupied since 2014, its de facto authorities and proxies have imposed draconian laws to suppress religious communities such as the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatars and Jehovah's Witnesses. Meanwhile, in Russia, the state has continued to prosecute an ever-growing list of religious groups as so-called "extremists" for their peaceful religious activities and launched a ruthless campaign to silence civil society and independent media.

USCIRF Chair **Nury Turkel** opened the hearing. In a video message Republican Senator **Roger Wicker** urged holding Russian President Putin accountable as he is one of the worst international violators of religious freedom, he stressed. Putin wants to go back to the old Soviet empire and has used religious nationalism to advance his cause, framing the war in these terms, he noted.

Dmytro Vovk, Visiting Associate Professor at Cardozo School of Law and member of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)'s Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief said that murders, torture, forced detention, acts of vandalism, and social hatred directed by the Russian forces are part of the everyday reality in the territories occupied by Russian forces. Since the invasion started, the Russian military has damaged 500 religious buildings, and over twenty religious figures have been murdered.

With Russia engaging aggressively in the newly occupied territories, Vovk urged to keep monitoring the situation by focusing on freedom of religious violations. This will help to raise global awareness, he said. Vovk recommended sanctioning those responsible, including the Moscow Patriarch, and urged facilitating legal support to the Ukrainian government regarding national security and religious issues. There should be restrictions against those religious leaders who support the war. The US government should support those leaders who are against the war, he stressed.

Rachel Denber, Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia Division at Human Rights Watch said that throughout the past decades the Kremlin has been trying to decimate a robust civil society in Russia, in a step-by-step repression. In this process, the authorities have abused Russia's extremism laws in order to persecute religious minorities. "The authorities are suspicious of any institution that they don't control", stressed Denber. They have continued to push traditional values and demonized anything they perceive as a threat.

The panel also heard from **Dennis Christensen**, a former religious prisoner of conscience and the first Jehovah's Witness to be convicted and imprisoned in Russia after its Supreme Court in 2017 labeled Jehovah's Witnesses "extremist" and banned their activities. Christensen was arrested in May 2017 during a worship service and sentenced to six years in prison for "organizing the activities of an extremist organization." On May 24, 2022, Christensen was released after serving his sentence and subsequently deported to his homeland, Denmark. In the hearing, he spoke of the Russian prison system as he experienced it for years throughout his detention. "Constant violations of religious freedom continue, it goes on and it is getting worse and worse", he added.

A Crimean Tatar's testimony was read out during the hearing, as he or she could not be present for fear of retribution. Since the 2014 Crimean occupation, Russia has used a variety of methods, including enforced disappearance of activists, convictions, in order to repress the Tatar community. The authorities imposed the mandatory re-registration of religious organizations in line with Russian laws, and the occupying forces also often dismissed applications for re-registration. There were 2200 religious organizations in the region before 2016, fewer than 800 remain after the occupation. The occupying authorities have used legislation to combat terror and anti-extremism to persecute religious groups, forcing Crimean Tatars that opposed the occupation to yield and accept the situation. This sent a message that no one is safe.

In the words of Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, President of the Conference of European Rabbis and Exiled Chief Rabbi of Moscow, the Jewish community in Russia is a community in distress. Under Putin the political system has become more and more authoritarian, and since the unprovoked war against Ukraine even semi-totalitarian. "War is a catastrophe for the Jewish community in both countries", he said. But feelings of

anti-Semitism are not grass root, but top down, government-led. Since the beginning of the war 30% left. Yet, not everyone can leave, Chief Rabbi noted, worried about the state of the Jewish community.

The panelists agreed that for the religious communities in Russia the situation can still get a lot worse. The West should therefore do much more to support the opposition, because they can bring change to the country. Ukraine remains the main victim of Russian aggression, but the West must also support other countries in the region, such as the Baltics or Poland, in order to prevent further aggression.

(*) USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan US federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of religious freedom or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

More reading

Mapping dated 26 March 2022: <https://bit.ly/42ml6gv>

Mapping dated 3 February 2023: <https://bit.ly/3JNgqZH>

Christianity Today: <https://bit.ly/3LI3ege>

World Council of Churches: <https://bit.ly/3Fzw604>

Photo: Mother of God Joy of All Who Sorrow Orthodox Church in the village Bohorodychne, Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine. The village came under attack by Russian forces in June 2022. Photo: Volodymyr Kutsenko

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest March 01 -15

15.03.2023 - The Supreme Court overturned the acquittal of three Jehovah's Witnesses from Karpinsk

Sova Center - On March 14, 2023, the Supreme Court of Russia overturned the acquittal of **Alexander Pryanikov, Venera and Daria Dulov**. Their case under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization) was sent for reconsideration to the appellate instance.

Recall that the case of Pryanikov and the Dulovs was initiated in the summer of 2018. In January 2020, they were given suspended sentences for the first time, but in August of the same year, the Sverdlovsk Regional Court overturned the sentence and sent the case back for a new trial.

[Continue reading...](#)

14.03.2023 - Now 12 jailed Crimean prisoners of conscience

Forum 18 - **Aleksandr Litvinyuk** is not due to complete his jail term and post-prison restrictions until the mid-2030s, by which time he would be over 75. Armyansk

Prosecutor's Office refused to put Forum 18 through to Prosecutor Minigul Saddykova, who led the prosecution case in court. Litvinyuk is among 12 Jehovah's Witnesses from Russian-occupied Crimea now jailed for at least six years to punish their exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Two more are serving suspended sentences including **Darya Kuzio**, wife of one of the prisoners.

[Continue reading...](#)

14.03.2023 - A Jehovah's Witness living in Stavropol is being persecuted under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code in the KChR

Sova center - On March 3, 2023, the home of Jehovah's Witness Alexei Pasyukov was searched in Stavropol. Earlier, on December 8, 2022, he became a suspect under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization). The case is being investigated by the Zelenchuk Interdistrict Investigation Department of the Investigation Department of the Investigative Committee for Karachay-Cherkessia.

[Continue reading...](#)

13.03.2023 - Sentence passed on followers of Said Nursi from Naberezhnye Chelny

Sova Center - On March 13, 2023, the Naberezhnye Chelny City Court sentenced local residents **Khunar Agaev, Aidar Sageev and Amrakh Akhmedov**, finding them guilty of involvement in the banned religious association Nurcular. The court appointed Agaev and Sageev two and a half years in a general regime colony under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization), in Akhmedova - a year and a half of imprisonment under part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization).

[Continue reading...](#)

09.03.2023 - The Court of Cassation upheld the verdict convicting four believers from Chita. Three will spend from 6 to 6.5 years in penal colonies

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/03/091402.html>

On March 7, 2023, the Eighth Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction in Kemerovo confirmed the verdict and the appeal ruling against four Chita residents for their faith, as final. The court hearing was held via videoconferencing.

The court of first instance convicted **Vladimir Ermolaev, Aleksandr Putintsev, Igor Mamalimov and Sergey Kirilyuk** of extremism for their peaceful religious beliefs on June 6, 2022, and on September 20 of the same year, the court of appeal upheld this

decision. All convicts are already detained in penal colonies, except Sergey Kirilyuk, who was given a 6-year suspended sentence.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.03.2023 - Case of Jehovah's Witness from Orel brought to court

Sova Center - **Tatyana Piskareva** is accused of participating in the activities of a banned community.

On March 7, 2023, the Investigative Committee of the Investigative Committee for the Oryol Region announced that the case had been transferred to court under Part 2 of Art. 282 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization) against a 66-year-old Jehovah's Witness. Obviously, we are talking about **Tatyana Piskareva**.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.03.2023 - Criminal case initiated against Jehovah's Witnesses in Vladivostok

Sova Center - Two believers were sent to a pre-trial detention center, another one was placed under house arrest, one was placed under a ban on certain actions, and a written undertaking not to leave was taken from six more.

On March 5, 2023, as part of the investigation of a criminal case under all three parts of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization, involving others in its activities and participation in such activities), searches were carried out against Jehovah's Witnesses at ten addresses in Vladivostok. According to the Investigative Committee, a written undertaking not to leave was taken from six people, and they wanted to send four more into custody.

[Continue reading...](#)

06.03.2023 - Court of Appeal in Chelyabinsk upheld the verdict against Andrey Perminov, one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Disabled person will serve a 6-year suspended sentence

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/03/060938.html>

On March 3, 2023, the Chelyabinsk Regional Court upheld the verdict against **Andrey Perminov** who is disabled — a 6-year suspended sentence. Judge Marina Klyushina agreed with the ruling of the court of first instance to deem peaceful religious services and discussions of the Bible to be extremism.

The verdict has entered into force. Although the legislation of the Russian Federation does not classify the dissemination and practice of the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses as extremism, the courts interpreted the believer's actions as organizing the activity of an

extremist organization. The prosecutor's office found the ruling of the court of first instance to be too lenient and appealed it.

[Continue reading...](#)

03.03.2023 - The Khabarovsk Regional Court considered the appeal of a Jehovah's Witness

Sova center - On March 1, 2023, the Khabarovsk Regional Court considered an appeal in the case of Jehovah's Witness Egor Baranov. Earlier, on June 6, 2022, the Vyazemsky District Court of the Khabarovsk Territory sentenced Baranov to five years of suspended imprisonment, finding him guilty of CC. 1.1 and 2 Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (involvement in the activities of an extremist organization and participation in it). The regional court reduced this term by six months - up to four and a half years of suspended sentence.

[Continue reading...](#)

03.03.2023 - 'Court' in Russian-occupied Crimea passes long sentences against three Ukrainian Jehovah's Witnesses

khpg.org - The Russian occupation 'Yalta municipal court' has convicted four Jehovah's Witnesses of preposterous charges based solely on the Ukrainians' faith, with three men sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. Instead of complying with international law which prohibits an occupying state from applying its legislation on occupied territory, Russia's religious persecution in occupied Crimea is worse even than that on Russian territory. If in Russia, 'judges' do fairly often pass suspended sentences, virtually all 'trials' in occupied Crimea have ended in terms of imprisonment of between 6 and 7 years.

[Continue reading...](#)

02.03.2023 - Court of Appeal in Birobidzhan upheld the verdict for Svetlana Monis. A 2.5-year suspended sentence for her faith.

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/03/020856.html>

On February 28, 2023, the Court of the Jewish Autonomous Region considered the case of **Svetlana Monis**, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, for the third time. The appeals panel approved the decision of the lower court: for her faith she was found guilty of participating in extremist activity and given a 2.5-year suspended sentence.

In May 2021, the Court of the Jewish Autonomous Region replaced the fine imposed on Monis with a 2.5-year suspended imprisonment. Later, the court of cassation overturned this decision. In March 2022, after a second appeal the case was returned to the Birobidzhan District Court for a new trial. This time, the court of first instance imposed a 2.5-year suspended sentence.

[Continue reading...](#)

Six years and five months of prison for a Jehovah's Witness

[The European Times](#) (13.03.2023) - Despite Russia's war in Ukraine and a decision of the [European Court](#) in 2022 urging Russia to stop all pending criminal proceedings against Jehovah's Witnesses, Putin has not halted his repression policy against Jehovah's Witnesses.

Konstantin Sannikov sentenced to 6 years and 5 months in a penal colony

On 15 February 2023, the Sovetskiy District Court of Kazan sentenced **Konstantin Sannikov** to 6 years and 5 months in a penal colony. For conducting peaceful religious services of Jehovah's Witnesses, the court found him guilty of extremism.

Throughout the preliminary investigation and trial – for more than two years – Konstantin has been in a detention center.

In August 2020, the FSB of Tatarstan initiated a criminal case under part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (organizing the activity of an extremist organization) against Konstantin Sannikov, doctor of forensics and the father of 4 children. Conversations about the Bible among friends were regarded as organizing extremist activity. Sannikov was placed in a detention center, and his bank accounts were frozen. In August 2021, court hearings began. While in custody for about two years, he was never allowed a visit from his wife. During his imprisonment, his chronic illnesses worsened. In court, his boss spoke of him as a responsible and honest worker who had never been reprimanded, but, on the contrary, repeatedly received commendation, incentives and awards. The testimonies of secret witnesses did not correspond to reality and indicated personal aversion to this denomination.

On 20 February 2023, the Vakhitovsky District Court of Kazan found **Andrey Bochkarev** guilty of organizing the activities of an extremist organization. He pleaded non-guilty. He was sentenced to three years and one month of imprisonment, but he was released in the courtroom, since he has actually served his long term in a pre-trial detention center!

During the first two months and a half of 2023, there were also a lot of suspended sentences to prison; appeal courts and the Cassation Court also confirmed the sentences to effective prison terms of many other Jehovah's Witnesses who were already in pretrial detention. [LINK](#).

The European Court of Human Rights [ruled](#) that the Russian Federation "must take all necessary measures to secure the discontinuation of all pending criminal proceedings against Jehovah's Witnesses... and the release of all Jehovah's Witnesses in custody" (§ 285).

'Court' in Russian-occupied Crimea passes long sentences against three Ukrainian Jehovah's Witnesses

By Halya Coynash

[KHPJ](#) (03.03.2023) - The Russian occupation 'Yalta municipal court' [has convicted](#) four Jehovah's Witnesses of preposterous charges based solely on the Ukrainians' faith, with three men sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. Instead of complying with international law which prohibits an occupying state from applying its legislation on occupied territory, Russia's religious persecution in occupied Crimea is worse even than that on Russian territory. If in Russia, 'judges' do fairly often pass suspended sentences, virtually all 'trials' in occupied Crimea have ended in terms of imprisonment of between 6 and 7 years.

The charges in all such cases derive solely from the intentionally condemned ruling by Russia's Supreme Court on 20 April 2017 which outlawed the Jehovah's Witnesses, claiming that this world faith was 'an extremist organization'. Russia has since unleashed waves of religious persecution at home and in occupied Crimea, hiding behind its profoundly flawed legislation on so-called 'extremism.'

Four believers were on 'trial': **Taras Kuzio** (b. 1978); his wife **Daria Kuzio** (b. 1982); **Petro Zhiltsov** (b. 1987) and **Serhiy Liulin** (b. 1984). The sentences were passed by 'judge' **Volodymyr Romanenko** on 27 February 2023, after a 'trial' that had lasted almost a year. This was the first time in occupied Crimea that a new charge was laid with two of the men: Taras Kuzio and Petro Zhiltsov accused of 'financing an extremist organization' under Article 282.3 § 1 of Russia's criminal code, as well as of 'organizing' such an 'organization' (Article 282.2 § 1). The sheer meaninglessness of these charges is only highlighted by the fact that Zhiltsov and Liulin received identical sentences although Zhiltsov faced two charges, and Liulin only one.

Despite the fact that the couple have two young children (a son aged 9 and 6-year-old daughter), the prosecutor had demanded a 7.5-year sentence against Taras Kuzio and a real 3-year sentence against Daria Kuzio, with this to be deferred until the younger child turned 14. 7-year sentences were sought against both Zhiltsov and Liulin.

Romanenko sentenced **Taras Kuzio** to 6.5 years' imprisonment; **Petro Zhiltsov** and **Serhiy Liulin** to 6.1 years. He imposed a 3.5-year suspended sentence against **Daria Kuzio**. It is worth noting, however, that suspended sentences can become real at any moment if the person is deemed to have 'repeated the offence'. Like the others, Daria Kuzio has effectively been 'found guilty' of what she never for a second denied, and doubtless has no intention of renouncing now, namely her religious beliefs. The sentences are not final, and will be appealed, however the only appeals with respect to Crimean prisoners of conscience which have, up till now, been allowed have been those by the prosecutor against sentences deemed 'too lenient'.

Taras Kuzio was first mentioned as facing charges after a wave of armed searches in Yalta on 20 March 2019, however at that stage it was only **Artem Gerasimov** who ended up 'on trial' ([and sentenced to 6 years' imprisonment](#)).

On 11 March 2021, the FSB stormed at least nine homes of believers in Yalta, including that of the Kuzio family. The FSB removed electronic devices and Bibles, and took Taras away. He was, however, only in custody for two days, with an occupation 'judge' at least rejecting the application for him to be placed in detention, because of his small children, and placing him under house arrest. He was initially charged only with 'financing a supposedly extremist organization' (Article 282.3 § 1), however later the prosecution also added the 'organizing' charge, under Article 282.2 § 1.

Petro Zhiltsov was detained on 29 July 2021. He had earlier been interrogated as a 'witness' in the case against Kuzio, however the same 'investigator' – V.A. Novikov initiated identical charges (under Article 282.2 § 1), accusing Zhiltsov of both financing and of organizing the so-called 'activities of an extremist organization'. On that same date, Novikov also initiated charges of 'organizing an extremist organization', under Article 282.2 § 1 against Daria Kuzio; Serhiy Liulin and Tadevos Manukian (the charge against the latter appears to be in absentia).

[As reported](#), Liulin was seized by FSB officers in Russia on 11 August 2021. They forced him into the boot of a minivan and drove him, in handcuffs and bound with scotch tape, for 16 hours to occupied Simferopol. He was shortly afterwards remanded in custody, and spent 203 days in the notorious Simferopol SIZO [remand prison], being held for most of that time in a cell with renowned [Crimean Tatar civic leader and journalist Nariman Dzhelyal](#). He was released under house arrest on 1 March 2022.

There were three 'secret witnesses' in this case, despite the lack of any grounds for not revealing their identity. During the hearings, Taras Kuzio noted that these individuals, identified as 'Ivanov'; 'Petrov' and 'Volodin' – all gave identical 'testimony'. Although they were supposed to have attended services for more than a year, they claimed to not remember anybody except the defendants. The three all also said that they had shared the ideology of the Jehovah's Witnesses, however were unable to explain the faith's teachings, and, according to the JW.org report, could not even pronounce God's name correctly. It is assumed that they were in fact FSB agents. Russia standardly uses such anonymous 'witnesses' in persecuting Crimeans on political or religious grounds, with the 'judges' generally helping the prosecution by blocking questions aimed at demonstrating that these 'witnesses' are lying. This [has been condemned](#) by the UN Secretary General (in 2021) and the European Court of Human Rights [found in September 2020](#) that Russia had violated the right to a fair trial of three men because of the unwarranted use of 'secret witnesses' to convict them.

In June 2022, the European Court of Human Rights [belatedly issued a judgement](#), finding Russia's ban of the Jehovah's Witnesses to be unlawful and ordering, among other things, that Russia discontinue current proceedings and release those imprisoned for their faith. The judgement coincided with attempts by Moscow to backdate its withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights and, therefore, the Court. These attempts were unlawful, and the judgement is indisputably binding upon Russia. It is, however, being ignored, as are numerous other rulings by international courts and other bodies concerning all occupied parts of Ukraine.

A brief summary of other prosecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses [can be found here](#).

Photo: From left, clockwise Taras Kuzio, Serhiy Liulin, Petro Zhiltsov, Daria Kuzio Photos and montage from JW.org site

New legislation restricting missionary work breached the European Convention

[Registrar of the European Court](#) (07.03.2023) - In today's **Chamber** judgment¹ in the case of **Ossewaarde v. Russia** (application no. 27227/17) the European Court of Human Rights held, unanimously, that there had been:

a violation of Article 9 (freedom of religion) of the European Convention on Human Rights, and
a violation of Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination) of the European Convention taken in conjunction with Article 9.

The case concerns a US national living in Russia, a Baptist Christian, who was fined for holding Bible study meetings in his home without notifying the authorities.

The sanction was imposed on the applicant following new legal requirements for missionary work introduced in Russia in 2016 as part of an anti-terrorism package. The new legislation made it an offence to evangelise in private homes and required prior authorisation for missionary work from a religious group or organisation.

The Court found in particular that the Government had not explained the rationale behind such new formalities for missionary work which had left no room for people engaged in individual evangelism, such as the applicant. There was no evidence that the applicant had used any improper methods of proselytism, involving coercion or incitement to hatred or intolerance.

A legal summary of this case will be available in the Court's database HUDOC ([link](#)).

Principal facts

The applicant, Donald Jay Ossewaarde, is a national of the United States of America who was born in 1960. He lived in Oryol (Russia) and had a permanent residence permit.

The applicant and his wife are Baptist Christians. Since moving to Oryol in 2005 they regularly held prayer and Bible study meetings in their home. Mr Ossewaarde personally invited people to the meetings and posted information about them on notice boards.

Against the background of newly adopted legislation concerning missionary work, three police officers turned up at the couple's home on 14 August 2016 during a Sunday meeting. After the Bible study, the officers took statements from those present and then escorted Mr Ossewaarde to the local police station.

At the police station he had his fingerprints taken and was shown a letter of complaint about evangelical tracts being posted on the notice board in the entrance of an apartment building. The police drew up an administrative offence report for conducting illegal missionary work as a non- Russian national.

He was then taken directly to court for a short hearing before being convicted of carrying out missionary work without notifying the authorities of the establishment of a religious group. He was fined 40,000 roubles (approximately 650 euros at the time).

His conviction was upheld on appeal in a summary fashion. His additional requests for review of the conviction were all ultimately rejected.

Complaints, procedure and composition of the Court

Relying in particular on Article 9 (freedom of religion), Mr Ossewaarde complained about being fined for preaching Baptism under the new legislation, arguing that he had not been a member of any religious association but had been exercising his right to spread his personal religious convictions. He also complained under Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination) in conjunction with Article 9 about discrimination on account of nationality because, as a US national, he was given a higher fine than a Russian national.

The application was lodged with the European Court of Human Rights on 30 March 2017.

The European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses was granted leave to intervene as a third party.

The Court's procedure for processing of applications against Russia can be found [here](#). Judgment was given by a Chamber of seven judges, composed as follows:

Pere **Pastor Vilanova** (Andorra), *President*, Georgios A. **Serghides** (Cyprus),
Yonko **Grozev** (Bulgaria),
Jolien **Schukking** (the Netherlands), Darian **Pavli** (Albania),

Ioannis **Ktistakis** (Greece), Andreas **Zünd** (Switzerland),

and also Olga **Chernishova**, *Deputy Section Registrar*.

Decision of the Court

The Court established that it had jurisdiction to deal with the case, as the facts giving rise to the alleged violations of the Convention had taken place before 16 September 2022, the date on which Russia ceased to be a Party to the European Convention.

Article 9 (freedom of religion)

The Court reiterated that the act of imparting information about a particular set of beliefs to others who do not hold those beliefs – known as missionary work or evangelism in Christianity – was protected under Article 9. In particular, when there had been no evidence of coercion or improper pressure, the Court had previously affirmed the right to engage in individual evangelism and door- to-door preaching.

It noted that there was no evidence that Mr Ossewaarde had made anyone participate in his religious meetings against their will or that he had sought to incite hatred, discrimination or intolerance. He had thus been sanctioned not for any improper methods of proselytism but solely for failing to comply with the new legal requirements applicable to missionary work which had been introduced in 2016.

The Court found that the new requirements – making it an offence to evangelise in private homes and requiring prior authorisation for missionary work from a religious group or organisation – had left no room for people engaged in individual evangelism, such as the applicant.

The Government had not explained the rationale behind such new formalities for missionary work. The Court was not therefore convinced that the interference with the applicant's right to freedom of religion on account of his missionary activities had pursued any "pressing social need".

Moreover, sanctioning the applicant for his alleged failure to inform the authorities of the establishment of a religious group had not been “necessary in a democratic society”. The freedom to manifest one’s beliefs and to talk to others about them, could not be made conditional on any acts of State approval or administrative registration; to do so would amount to accepting that a State could dictate what a person had to believe.

There had accordingly been a violation of Article 9 of the Convention.

Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination) in conjunction with Article 9

The Court noted that, under the Code of Administrative Offences, the minimum fine for a non- national found guilty of an offence of illegal missionary work was six times higher than for a Russian national. Non-nationals were also liable to expulsion. There was therefore a difference in treatment of persons in an analogous situation on the grounds of their nationality.

The Court found no justification for such difference in treatment, which was also hard to reconcile with Russia’s Religions Act providing that non-nationals lawfully present in Russia could exercise the right to freedom of religion in the same way as Russian nationals could.

There had accordingly been a violation of Article 14 of the Convention, taken in conjunction with Article 9.

Just satisfaction (Article 41)

The Court held that Russia was to pay the applicant 592 euros (EUR) in respect of pecuniary damage, EUR 10,000 in respect of non-pecuniary damage and EUR 4,000 in respect of costs and expenses.

The judgment is available only in English.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest Feb 16-28

03.03.2023 - Court' in Russian-occupied Crimea passes long sentences against three Ukrainian Jehovah's Witnesses

KHPG - The Russian occupation 'Yalta municipal court' has convicted four Jehovah's Witnesses of preposterous charges based solely on the Ukrainians' faith, with three men sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. Instead of complying with international law which prohibits an occupying state from applying its legislation on occupied territory, Russia's religious persecution in occupied Crimea is worse even than that on Russian territory. If in Russia, 'judges' do fairly often pass suspended sentences, virtually all 'trials' in occupied Crimea have ended in terms of imprisonment of between 6 and 7 years.

[Continue reading...](#)

27.02.2023 - Jehovah's Witnesses from Yalta sentenced

Sova center - On February 27, 2023, the Yalta City Court sentenced four local Jehovah's Witnesses. **Taras Kuzio** was sentenced to six and a half years in prison in a penal colony with restriction of freedom for a year. **Sergei Lyulin and Petr Zhiltsov** each received six years and one month in prison and a year of restriction of freedom. The court sentenced Darya Kuzio to three years of suspended liberty with the same probationary period.

[Continue reading...](#)

24.02.2023 - In Saransk, a new wave of searches at Jehovah's Witnesses. Three believers arrested

Link to full text in Russian : <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/02/241011.html>

Early in the morning of February 14, 2023, law enforcement officers in Saransk conducted at least ten searches in the homes of believers who are suspected of practicing the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. It is known that **Mikhail Shevchuk, Artem Velichko** and **Ivan Neverov** were sent to Detention Center No. 1 in the Republic of Mordovia.

On January 11, 2023, the investigator of the Ministry of Internal Affairs V. A. Makeeva opened a criminal case against three local residents. In the friendly meetings of believers, she saw a crime—"organizing the activities of an extremist organization" (part 1 of article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). Investigator K. I. Frantsuzov is handling the case. On February 3, he received court permission to conduct searches in the region.

[Continue reading...](#)

22.02.2023 - Aleksandr Shcherbina released. For his faith, he spent 2 years in a colony

Link to full text in Russian : <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/02/220913.html>

On February 22, 2023, **Aleksandr Shcherbina** was released after serving his full term of imprisonment for his belief in Jehovah God. Earlier, the appeal commuted his sentence, reducing the period of stay in the colony from three years to two.

Shcherbina faced criminal prosecution in 2020, when homes of Jehovah's Witnesses were searched in the villages of the Krasnodar Territory. The accusation of extremism was followed by 2 months of litigation. As a result, the believer received a real term of imprisonment in a general regime colony only because of his religion.

[Continue reading...](#)

22.02.2023 - Andrey Andreyev, the last of the Kursk Jehovah's Witnesses convicted for their faith, released from the Colony

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/02/220915.html>

On February 22, 2023, to the applause of relatives and friends, **Andrey Andreyev** was released from a penal colony in Lipetsk. He served the complete term given by the court - 4.5 years - for his faith in Jehovah God.

About a hundred people waited for more than two hours at a temperature of -17 degrees to greet Andrey.

In fact, Andrey Andreyev spent 3 years, 4 months and 9 days behind bars. For most of this period, he was in a pre-trial detention center.

[Continue reading...](#)

21.02.2023 - Three Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced in Kazan. Believers received various terms of imprisonment

Link to full text in Russian : <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/02/210917.html>

On February 20, 2023, the Vakhitovsky District Court of Kazan found **Tatyana Obizhestvit** and **the Bochkarevs** guilty of organizing the activities of an extremist community. None of those convicted pleaded guilty.

Tatyana Obizhestvit and Leysan Bochkareva received suspended sentences of 2 and 2 and a half years, respectively. Andrey Bochkarev was sentenced to 3 years and 1 month of real imprisonment, but he was released in the courtroom, since he has actually served his term in a pre-trial detention center.

[Continue reading...](#)

21.02.2023 - State Prosecutor requests eight years in Prison for a Jehovah's Witness from the Krasnoyarsk Territory

Sova Center - **Yuri Yakovlev** is accused of organizing the activities of a banned organization.

On February 17, 2023, during a debate in the Sosnovoborsk City Court of the Krasnoyarsk Territory, the state prosecutor asked that Jehovah's Witness Yuri Yakovlev be sentenced to eight years in a penal colony.

The believer is accused under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization). A criminal case was opened against him on March 28, 2022 — on that day, searches were conducted in five homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Sosnovoborsk, and Yakovlev was detained. Two days later, the court sent him to jail. According to investigators, he organized online meetings of the community, was engaged in "pastoral work" and supervised "preaching activities." In June 2022, the case of a Jehovah's Witness came to court for consideration on the merits.

[Continue reading...](#)

20.02.2023 - Jehovah's Witnesses detained in Leningrad Region

Sova Center - On February 20, 2023, the investigative department of the Russian Investigative Committee for the Leningrad Region announced the detention of six Jehovah's Witnesses as part of an investigation into a case initiated under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization).

According to investigators, in April 2017, in the Kingisepp District, a local resident born in 1989, whose name is not named, organized "propaganda meetings with the participation of adherents via video link and at their places of residence, at which forbidden literature and methods of its distribution were studied and discussed", and also "performed managerial functions aimed at supporting the activities of a religious organization, including those related to the collection of donations." Five other detainees were members of the organization, the UK believes.

[Continue reading...](#)

20.02.2023 - Court passes judgment on Jehovah's Witnesses from Kazan

Sova Center - Andrei Bochkarev received a real term, but was immediately released. Leysan Bochkareva and Tatyana Obijestvit were sentenced to suspended sentences.

On February 20, 2023, the Vakhitovsky District Court of Kazan passed a sentence on Jehovah's Witnesses, who were accused of organizing the activities of an extremist organization (Part 1, Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code). Andrei Bochkarev was sentenced by the court to three years and a month in prison to be served in a strict regime colony, but he was immediately released: Bochkarev was credited with the time he spent in custody during the investigation. His wife Leysan Bochkareva received a two and a half year suspended sentence with a probationary period of the same duration, and Tatyana Obijestvit received two years suspended sentence with a two-year probationary period.

[Continue reading...](#)

16.02.2023 - Court in Kazan gave Konstantin Sannikov, a father of four, 6.5 years in a Penal Colony for reading the Bible

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/02/161447.html>

On February 15, 2023, the Sovetskiy District Court of Kazan sentenced **Konstantin Sannikov** to 6.5 years in a penal colony. For conducting peaceful religious services of Jehovah's Witnesses, the court found him guilty of extremism.

Several secret witnesses testified in the Sannikov case. According to the defense, their statements did not correspond to reality and indicated personal hostility toward Jehovah's Witnesses. Also Judge Marat Khaertdinov noticed this: at one of the hearings he stated that the witness was clearly trying to slander the defendant.

[Continue reading...](#)

16.02.2023 - New raids in the Khabarovsk Territory. Criminal case initiated against a 76-year-old believer

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/02/160909.html>

On February 13, 2023, in the village of Dormidontovka, Khabarovsk Territory, police conducted at least two searches and interrogations of persons suspected of practicing the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. A day earlier, a criminal case was opened against 76-year-old Liliya Dolinina.

At 6:00 am, operatives broke into the homes of elderly believers to conduct searches that lasted 4 hours. Electronic devices, computer storage media and personal records were confiscated from Liliya Dolinina and another man. After the searches, the believers were taken to the investigative committee for interrogation, where they were tried to find out who else in the village professes the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses and organizes worship meetings.

[Continue reading...](#)

16.02.2023 - The court in Krasnoyarsk liquidated the Church of the last testament

On October 24, 2022, the Krasnoyarsk Regional Court granted the claim of the regional prosecutor's office to liquidate the local religious organization "Church of the Last Testament".

The prosecutor's office, followed by the court, considered that the organization "threatens the interests of society and the state, infringes on the personality, rights and freedoms of citizens, entails damage to the morality and health of citizens".

The decision of the court has not yet entered into force, the defense intends to appeal it. Lawyer Ivan Khoroshev, who represents the interests of the Church, believes that the conclusion of the expert examination, on which the court relied, was prepared "in gross violation of the law." In particular, the examination was carried out outside a state institution and without the appointment of experts by the court: "The procedure for initiating a specialist as an expert has been violated. If the procedure is violated, then the experts are not legally responsible for their conclusions. The entire judicial practice of administrative proceedings suggests that such examinations cannot be recognized as admissible .

[Continue reading...](#)

Russia to pay about 350,000 EUR to Jehovah's Witnesses for disrupting their religious meetings

[European Times](#) (24.02.2023) – Jehovah's Witnesses Russia (03.02.2023) - On January 31, 2023, the European Court of Human Rights, having considered seven complaints from Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia, recognized the disruption of worship services from 2010 to 2014 as a violation of fundamental freedoms. The ECHR ruled to pay compensation to the applicants in the amount of 345,773 EUR and another 5,000 EUR as legal costs.

What Happened?

This case concerns the disruption of religious meetings in 17 regions of Russia, as well as searches, confiscation of literature and personal belongings, and several cases of detention with personal searches.

Law enforcement officers, sometimes armed and wearing masks, would brake into the buildings where worship services of Jehovah's Witnesses were being conducted. The actions of law enforcement officers were justified by technicalities, for example, by the fact that the meetings were organized without prior notice to the authorities. The security forces either demanded that the event be stopped or remained on the premises and filmed what was happening using photo and video equipment, after which they interrogated those present.

On several occasions, police raided places of worship, including private residences. The search warrants did not provide specific grounds. They only stated that the buildings may contain "evidence relevant to the criminal case."

"The applicants unsuccessfully pleaded with [the police] to postpone the search until after the end of the religious services." Several similar cases are described in the ECHR decision (§ 4).

The victims appealed against the actions of the security forces in local courts, but their demands were not satisfied.

ECHR Decision

The European Court concluded that the actions of the Russian authorities violated Article 9 of the Convention on Human Rights, which declares the fundamental right to participate in peaceful religious assemblies.

Here are excerpts from the judgment of the ECHR.

"The disruption of a religious assembly by the authorities and sanctioning of the applicants for holding 'unauthorized' religious events amounts to 'interference by a public authority' with the applicants' right to manifest their religion." (§ 9)

"The Court has previously noted the consistent case-law of Russia's Supreme Court that religious meetings, even those conducted on rented premises, did not require prior authorization from, or notice to, the authorities . . . [the applicants'] conviction did not have a clear . . . legal basis and was not 'prescribed by law.'" (§ 10)

"It is undisputed that all religious assemblies were peaceful in their nature and were not likely to cause any disturbance or danger to the public order. Their disruption . . . did not pursue a 'pressing social need' and therefore not 'necessary in a democratic society.'" (§.11)

"The Court finds that the search warrants had been couched in extremely broad terms . . . They did not specify why the particular premises were targeted, what it was that the police expected to find there and what relevant and sufficient reasons justified the need to conduct the search." (§.12)

What Does the Decision of the European Court Mean?

Although the cases reviewed by the ECHR dealt with events prior to the ban on Russian legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017, hundreds of criminal cases filed since then have treated the joint discussion of the Holy Scriptures as a crime.

Yaroslav Sivulskiy, representative of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, commented on the decision of the ECHR: "The ECHR once again emphasized that there is not and cannot be anything extremist in the religious meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses. The same was recognized by the [Plenum of the Supreme Court of Russia](#); however, some Russian courts continue to act contrary to these rulings, [putting Jehovah's Witnesses behind bars](#) merely because of their religion."

More than 60 applications from those who suffered from the repressive campaign against Russian Jehovah's Witnesses are awaiting the European Court's decision.

In June 2022, the European Court of Human Rights recognized [the liquidation](#) of legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia as illegal and [demanded](#) that the criminal prosecution of believers be stopped and that all those imprisoned for their faith be released.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest Feb 01-15

14.02.2023 - Two Catholic priests expelled from Russia

Sova Center - On January 21, it became known about the disappearance of the rector of the Belgorod Catholic parish, priest Mark Bakezhinski, a citizen of Poland. Later it became known that he was detained by law enforcement agencies. January 24 Belgorod District Court under Part 1 of Art. 20.1 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (petty hooliganism) sentenced him to seven days of arrest for allegedly arranged by him on the morning of January 22, when he was supposed to prepare for the liturgy, "a scandal in a public place, during which he expressed rude obscene language, did not react to comments to stop hooligan actions , which violated public order and expressed a clear disrespect for society.

[Continue reading...](#)

10.02.2023 - Fled fearing prosecution for preaching that war is "terrible"

A Russian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) priest has been forced to leave Russia for fear of criminal prosecution over his opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Fr Aleksandr Dombrovsky, from Bryansk Region, went abroad in January, shortly after police told him that the Federal Security Service (FSB) had opened a case against him. He had repeatedly preached against the war in Ukraine in his sermons. "Everything related to my anti-war position was recorded in a most thorough manner," he told Forum 18.

[Continue reading...](#)

09.02.2023 - In Moscow, a native of Chechnya was banned from wearing a hijab in the office

Sova Center - On February 7, 2023, it became known that the management forbade Aminat Kantaeva, an employee of one of the Moscow private organizations, to wear a headscarf in the workplace.

Kantaeva, a native of Chechnya, complained to the Commissioner for Human Rights in this republic, Mansur Soltaev. He, in a telephone conversation with the head of the department where Kantaeva works, found out the reason for such a requirement: according to the employer, the scarf "scars away customers" who come to the office.

The CEO of the company promised to resolve this issue in the near future.

09.02.2023 - Court in Mezhdurechensk refuses to ban Falun Dafa founder's books

The decision was made in November 2022. The prosecutor's office decided to appeal it.

On November 9, 2022, the Mezhdurechensk City Court of the Kemerovo Region dismissed an administrative claim by the prosecutor's office to recognize the books "Falun Dafa. The essence of diligent cultivation. I-II" and "Falun Dafa. The essence of diligent cultivation. III" by Li Hongzhi. On February 2, 2023, the Kemerovo Regional Court received an appeal from the prosecutor against this decision, and its consideration is scheduled for March 2.

[Continue reading...](#)

06.02.2023 - In St. Petersburg, a criminal case was opened against a former priest about "fakes" about the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation

Sova Center - On June 8, 2022, it became known that a criminal case had been opened in St. Petersburg under paragraph "e", part 2 of Art. 207.3 of the Criminal Code (public dissemination under the guise of reliable reports of knowingly false information

containing data on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation based on political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity or based on hatred or enmity against any social group) in regarding the former priest John (Dmitry) Kurmoyarov.

[Continue reading...](#)

06.02.2023 - Publisher Ezhaev sentenced to 17 years in prison

On February 3, 2023, the Second Western District Military Court found the head of the Umma publishing house, Aslambek Ezhaev, guilty under Part 4 of Art. 205.1 of the Criminal Code (organization organization of financing of terrorist activities) and sentenced him to 17 years in prison.

[Continue reading...](#)

05.02.2023 - Ouster of Buddhist leader in Kalmykia likely to make that Republic a new headache for the Kremlin

The Kremlin may have felt it had no choice to push for the ouster of the long-time Buddhist leader of Kalmykia given his criticism of Moscow's war in Ukraine, China's unhappiness with a Buddhist leader in Russia so close to the Dalai Lama and the Kalmyk political leadership's desire to have its own man in that position.

[Continue reading...](#)

03.02.2023 - In Kamchatka, another foreign citizen fined for "illegal" missionary work

Sova Center - On January 20, 2023, the Elizovsky District Court of the Kamchatka Territory found the foreign citizen **Abdumashit Abduvaliev** guilty under Part 5 of Art. 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (implementation by a foreign citizen of missionary activity in violation of the requirements of the law) and fined him 30 thousand rubles.

According to the court, he, being in the temporary detention center for foreign citizens of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs for the Kamchatka Territory, "conducted religious ceremonies with the participation of at least 10-12 persons", without permits and not belonging to any religious organization. Abduvaliev admitted guilt.

03.02.2023 - The ECtHR has published a decision on the complaint against the ban on the magazines "Zvezda Selenny" and the Novosibirsk organization "Allya-Ayat"

The European Court considered that the right of the leader of the Novosibirsk group "Allya-Ayat" Valery Milshtein to freedom of religion, freedom of expression and freedom of association was violated.

On January 31, 2023, the European Court of Human Rights published the decision rendered on January 10 on application No. 1377/14 Milstein v. Russia. Valery Milshtein, a resident of Novosibirsk, appealed against the decision to ban publications and activities of adherents of the Alla-Ayat (Elle-Ayat) sun-worshipping movement, which preaches the treatment of all diseases through nature-related rites.

[Continue reading...](#)

02.02.2023 - ECtHR decides to pay compensation to Jehovah's Witnesses for disrupted services

On January 31, 2023, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the Nabokikh and Others v. Russia case, which brought together the complaints of several Jehovah's Witnesses whose religious meetings in 18 Russian regions were disrupted by security forces in 2010-2013.

We are talking about the cases "Nabokikh and others against Russia" (Kirov, Volgograd, Prokhladny, Vladimir, Ufa), "Martynenko and others against Russia" (Yoshkar-Ola), "Zinchenko and others against Russia" (Smolensk, Perm, Kazan, Kaliningrad, Voronezh, Belgorod, Blagoveshchensk), Burenkov and Others v. Russia (Salekhard), Golovko and Others v. Russia (Kemerovo), Shaikhiev and Others v. Russia (Naberezhnye Chelny, Dubna), Mashinsky and Others v. Russia" (Primorsky Territory).

[Continue reading...](#)

02.02.2023 - ECtHR rules on complaint against ban on Zhuan Falun and three other Falun Gong materials

The European Court held that the ban on Falun Gong materials violated Art. 9 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, guaranteeing the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

On January 31, 2023, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) published a ruling on the complaints of the followers of the spiritual movement "Falun Gong" Mikhail Sinitsyn and Sergey Alekhin on the recognition of four materials of the movement as extremist materials. The applicants pointed out that their rights guaranteed by Art. 9 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights - on freedom of religion and freedom of expression.

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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: "Disappeared" clergy, seized places of worship, library purge

Felix Corley, [Forum 18](#)

[Forum18](#) (03.02.2023) - Russian occupation authorities continue to violate freedom of religion and belief in the Ukrainian territory they currently control. In late 2022 two Greek Catholic priests and a Protestant pastor were the latest known religious leaders seized by occupation authorities, and it is unknown where they are or even if they are still alive. [UPDATE: Russian military seized Orthodox priest Platon Danyshchuk on 26 January.] Raids on and seizures of places of worship continued in January 2023, and a purge of "extremist" books from educational libraries was ordered in Luhansk.

Russian restrictions on freedom of religion and belief and other human rights are being illegally imposed on Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory in a more systematic way since Russia's claimed annexation in October 2022 of further Ukrainian territory. "Since October we are now part of Russia. The situation is different," Oleg Pomnikov of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry insisted to Forum 18 on 1 February.

The whereabouts, conditions of captivity, and state of health of three religious leaders from occupied Berdyansk remain unknown. Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) seized two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta, on 16 November 2022. Armed Russian soldiers seized Serhiy Karpenko, Pastor of the Vefil (Bethel) Protestant Church, on 12 December 2022. The Russian-controlled Berdyansk District Police did not answer Forum 18's questions. The duty officer at the Russian Military Command in Melitopol refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 or give any number for the Military Command in Berdyansk (see below).

In January, the Russian military broke into a Sunday worship meeting of a Baptist church in the occupied Ukrainian town of Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhia Region. The military checked the identity of all those present, searched the building and sealed it, taking the keys. The following day they seized another Baptist church in the town. The duty officer at the Russian Military Command in Melitopol refused to discuss anything with Forum 18, refused to give any number for the Military Command in Berdyansk and put the phone down (see below).

[UPDATE 6 February 2023: On 26 January, the Russian military seized Fr Platon Danyshchuk, Orthodox Church of Ukraine priest of Holy Trinity Church in the village of Dobropillya in occupied Kherson Region, Fr Ioan Zamarayev of the OCU's Kherson Diocese confirmed on 5 February.]

In Russian-occupied Kherson Region in January, the Russian Regional Police conducted at least two raids on Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls, even though they have been empty since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020. Russian police seized religious literature which they described as "extremist", noting that that Jehovah's Witnesses are banned in Russia. The police stressed that anyone continuing the activity of a religious community Russia has banned risks long jail terms under Russia's Criminal Code (see below).

The occupation authorities' Kherson Police described Jehovah's Witnesses as conducting "destructive" activity and "propagandising anti-Orthodox ideas, spreading extremist literature and rejecting the entry of the region into Russia" (see below).

In occupied Luhansk, in January 2023 the Russian military seized a Baptist church that the community has been banned by occupation authorities from using since 2017. Oleg Pomnikov, head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry, questioned whether the building is a church. "I looked at the records and there is no registered Baptist organisation in Luhansk," he told Forum 18 (see below).

Pomnikov claimed that the absence of registered Protestant, non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox, and Jehovah's Witness communities in the LPR "reflects the local population," he claimed (see below).

Pomnikov of the LPR's of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department insisted that anyone who wants to meet for worship legally is able to do so. He said the LPR attitude to religious communities has, since October 2022, been strictly governed by Russian Federation laws, including the Religion Law (see below).

Pomnikov claimed to sympathise with the Roman Catholic parish in Luhansk, which has been without a priest since its parish priest Fr Grzegorz Rapa, a Polish citizen, left temporarily in March 2020 and was then repeatedly blocked by the LPR from returning. Fr Rapa had served the parish since 1993. "I'm very sad that they can't resolve their problems," Pomnikov claimed to Forum 18. He insisted that if Fr Rapa wants to return, he must apply to the Russian Foreign Ministry (see below).

The LPR is following the neighbouring Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) by purging their libraries of literature they and the Russian occupation authorities regard as "extremist".

On 20 January, the LPR Education and Science Ministry instructed the heads of educational establishments to remove "literature of an extremist nature, expressing the ideology of Ukrainian nationalism" from their libraries by 24 January. Educational establishment heads who failed to do so would bear personal responsibility, they were warned. Yelena Bakhmut, the official who prepared the letter, refused to discuss it with Forum 18 (see below).

The books to be removed include two on Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky (who headed the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church until his death in 1944) and one on St Petro Mohyla, a 17th century Orthodox Metropolitan of Kyiv known for his educational and publishing activities (see below).

Russian restrictions on freedom of religion or belief imposed on occupied Ukraine

Freedom of religion or belief violations in the Ukrainian territories Russia has occupied since 2014 have not followed one pattern.

In occupied and illegally annexed [Crimea](#) the Russian government has forcibly imposed Russian laws and restrictions on exercising human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

In the occupied parts of the eastern Ukrainian territories of [Luhansk](#) (under the Russian-created Luhansk People's Republic - LPR) and [Donetsk](#) (under the Russian-created Donetsk People's Republic - LPR) serious violations of freedom of religion and belief and other human rights have also taken place since 2014.

Russia's February 2022 renewed invasion of Ukraine saw more Ukrainian territories brought under Russian occupation. As of early February 2023, Russia controls about 17 per cent of Ukrainian territory:

- 100 per cent of Crimea (including Sevastopol);
 - almost all of Luhansk Region;
 - about 60 per cent of Donetsk Region;
 - about 70 per cent of Zaporizhzhia Region;
 - about 70 per cent of Kherson Region;
- and small parts of Mykolaiv and Kharkiv Regions.

On 5 October 2022, following referenda that were widely denounced by the international community, Russia illegally annexed the DPR and LPR, retaining these names, along with Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions. "The so-called 'referenda' in Ukraine were conducted in areas under Russian occupation," United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said on Twitter on 29 September 2022. "They can't be called a genuine expression of the popular will."

In 2023, Russia is now following a more coordinated approach to impose the full range of [Russian restrictions on the exercise of freedom of religion or belief](#) across [all the Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine](#).

Unlawful application of Russian law to occupied Ukrainian territory

Russian occupation officials in 2023 now insist that Russian law applies to the occupied territories, and that religious communities must have registration under Russian law.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has condemned "the unlawful application of Russian Federation legislation by the occupation authorities of the Russian Federation in the occupied territory [Crimea]" in its [Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine for 1 August 2020 to 31 January 2021](#).

Under the [Geneva Convention \(IV\) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War](#) (2nd part), occupation authorities must [must respect the laws in force](#) in the country (Ukraine) "unless absolutely prevented".

Article 58 notes: "The Occupying Power shall permit ministers of religion to give spiritual assistance to the members of their religious communities."

Russia was in December 2022, against international law, passing a law giving its officials and military [impunity from prosecution](#) for crimes if acting "in the interests of the Russian Federation", also denying justice to those who have been unlawfully prosecuted by occupation authorities.

Occupation officials also say that any exercise of freedom of religion or belief not permitted [is punishable under Russia's Criminal or Administrative Codes](#).

Berdiansk: "Disappeared" clergy still "disappeared"

One Protestant pastor and two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests [seized in Berdiansk in late 2022](#) possibly remain in Russian detention, but it is unknown whether they are still alive.

Russian forces have [seized many leaders of a variety of religious communities](#) in the Ukrainian territory they occupy. In most of these cases, however, [it remains unclear if religious leaders were targeted](#) to specifically punish the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief.

On 16 November 2022, troops of Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) [seized the two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta](#), in Berdyansk. The Donetsk Exarchate has had no news of them since, it told Forum 18 on 2 February 2023.

On 12 December 2022, armed Russian soldiers [seized Serhiy Karpenko](#), Pastor of the Vefil (Bethel) Protestant Church, in Berdyansk.

Forum 18 has not been able to find out where Fr Levytsky, Fr Heleta, or Pastor Karpenko have been held, what their state of health is, or whether they have been released at an unknown location.

Officers of Berdyansk District's Russian-imposed police did not answer the phone each time Forum 18 called on 1 February. Forum 18 asked in writing that morning where Fr Levytsky, Fr Heleta and Pastor Karpenko are, why they have not been freed and whether they are still alive. Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day in Berdyansk of 3 February.

The duty officer at the Russian Military Command for Zaporizhzhia Region in Melitopol refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 on 1 February, refused to give any number for the Military Command in Berdyansk and put the phone down.

Among other religious leaders detained by Russia in occupied territory, on 21 September 2022 masked Russian soldiers took from their home in Mariupol Leonid Ponomaryov, Pastor of a Baptist Council of Churches congregation in the city, and his wife Tatyana. They were [in Donetsk on 21 October 2022](#).

On 22 November 2022, the Russian military seized businessman and Pentecostal deacon 52-year-old Anatoly Prokopchuk and his 19-year-old son Aleksandr Prokopchuk, who lived in Nova Kakhovka in Kherson Region. On 26 November 2022, their shot and mutilated bodies [were found in a nearby wood](#).

Berdyansk: Baptist churches closed and sealed

Also in Berdyansk, in January 2023 the Russian military closed two Ukrainian Baptist Union churches which had been able to continue to function up till that point.

On 22 January the Russian military burst into the Sunday worship service of the First Baptist Church in Berdyansk. They inspected the identity documents of each person present and searched the building. They then forced everyone outside and sealed the building, taking the keys, Ukraine's Baptist Union noted the next day. On 23 January, the Russian military summoned the church's pastor to the military headquarters.

The Baptist Church marked its 115th anniversary in September 2022, the Baptist Union said.

On 23 January, Russian occupation forces closed the Second Baptist Church in Berdyansk. "The demands were the same – to renounce Ukrainian registration and to register with the occupation administration," Ukraine's Baptist Union noted the same day.

A Baptist familiar with the situation told Forum 18 that a church member had come to the church that day and found Russian soldiers conducting a search. They seized documents and computers before sealing the building.

The duty officer at the Russian Military Command in Melitopol refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 on 1 February, refused to give any number for the Military Command in Berdyansk and put the phone down.

On 18 October 2022, the Russian military commandant of the town of [Chernihivka in Berdyansk District took the keys of the Baptist Church](#) and said that from now on the building is the property of the "administration". However, Baptists were allowed to continue meetings for worship.

Luhansk: Russian military seize closed Baptist church

At the end of January 2023, the Russian military seized the building of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Luhansk, the Ukrainian Baptist Union stated on 31 January. The congregation had not been able to use its church building since 2017, after the [enforced closure of all Protestant churches](#) in the Russian-controlled Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in the years after the illegal entity's establishment in 2014.

"It's on LPR territory and it does not have registration," Oleg Pomnikov, the head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry since autumn 2022, told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 1 February. He indicated that he had not heard of the seizure of Emmanuel Baptist Church, and asked Forum 18 for its address and said he would check.

"The building can't have been seized or confiscated – under Russian law this can't happen without a court order," Pomnikov insisted to Forum 18. He then questioned whether the building is a church. "I looked at the records and there is no registered Baptist organisation in Luhansk."

After the Russian-backed creation of the LPR in 2014, the LPR [banned all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without permission](#) from the entity's rulers. It also refused to register any Protestant churches – or communities of a range of other faiths, including the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Luhansk: "We are now part of Russia. The situation is different"

Oleg Pomnikov of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry insisted that anyone who wants to meet for worship legally is able to do so. He said the LPR attitude to religious communities has, since October 2022, been strictly governed by Russian Federation laws.

As of 3 February, 202 religious organisations in occupied Luhansk Region that had previously been registered by the Russian-backed LPR were registered with the Russian tax authorities. Almost all of these - 190 - are Russian Orthodox communities under the Moscow Patriarchate. Only 12 are from other communities: 8 Muslim; 1 Jewish; 1 Hare Krishna; 1 Old Believer; and 1 Roman Catholic.

Forum 18 asked Pomnikov why [no Baptist, Pentecostal, Seventh-day Adventist, Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Kyiv Patriarchate or Jehovah's Witness communities have been allowed to register](#). He replied: "There's one registered Buddhist community also." However, no Buddhist community appears on the Russian tax authorities' list of registered organisations.

Pomnikov of the LPR Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department claimed that the absence of registered Protestant, non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox and Jehovah's Witness communities "reflects the local population".

Many religious communities have not been able to, or do not want to seek registration under the LPR or – since 2022 – under Russian law. When Forum 18 asked what would happen to communities that meet without registration, Pomnikov replied: "They would consciously break the law if they are not registered. This is the law of the Russian Federation."

Pomnikov of the LPR Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department pointed to Article 9 of Russia's Religion Law, which imposes restrictive conditions for registration. Under Russian law, all unregistered groups must give the authorities full information about those who attend, meeting places, and activities.

Since the LPR was created in 2014 after Russia's invasion, LPR police have raided meetings for worship without LPR registration, and courts subsequently fined many religious leaders for leading those meetings. Protestants have been among those particularly targeted by such raids. When Forum 18 asked about this, Pomnikov responded: "I am not aware that the acts of the police were directed at people's religious activity. They were tackling violations of the law."

When Forum 18 listed some of the fines on religious leaders in recent years, Pomnikov responded: "Since October we are now part of Russia. The situation is different."

Kherson Region: Raids on empty Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls

The Russian Kherson Regional Police launched at least one criminal investigation and conducted at least two raids on Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls, even though they have not functioned since 2020. Jehovah's Witnesses across Ukraine stopped meeting in Kingdom Halls in early 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Kingdom Halls did not resume their activity in the regions occupied by Russia.

On 29 November 2022, Kherson Regional Police conducted "operational investigation measures" in the village of Krasne on the Black Sea coast which uncovered a group of Jehovah's Witnesses. Officers seized "banned" religious literature. They claim that the community was led by a 65-year-old individual.

Kherson Regional Police reminded readers of its Telegram channel that Russia had banned all Jehovah's Witness activity in 2017 – before Russia occupied Kherson. It also noted that under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, individuals can be jailed for up to 10 years for organising the activity of an "extremist" religious community and for up to 8 years for recruiting others to join such a community. The police said an investigation was underway.

Forum 18 understands that the 65-year-old individual is no longer in Russian-occupied territory.

On 23 January 2023, Kherson Police announced that they had raided the Kingdom Hall in the village of Novosofiivka close to the southern Black Sea coast. Footage of the raid on the Police's Telegram channel showed officers searching the empty premises and finding boxes and cupboards of Jehovah's Witness literature.

The police report described Jehovah's Witnesses as conducting "destructive" activity and "propagandising anti-Orthodox ideas, spreading extremist literature and rejecting the entry of the region into Russia". The report added that officers had "established the identity of the leader and activists of the cell". It reminded readers that Russia had banned all Jehovah's Witness activity under "anti-extremism" legislation.

On 23 January, Kherson Police also announced that they had that day raided the Kingdom Hall in the village of Oleshky, close to the Dnipro River. They claimed the raid was part of "operational investigation measures to halt the underground activity of extremist organisations". The Police report said officers had seized 1,700 "extremist" books and magazine, a collection box and portable display stands.

Luhansk: Will Catholic priest be able to return?

Oleg Pomnikov, the head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry, claimed to sympathise with the Roman Catholic parish of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Luhansk and a smaller parish in Stakhanov [official Ukrainian name Kadiyevka]. The Luhansk parish had registration under the LPR and in November 2022 it was among the religious communities in the LPR whose registration the Russian authorities accepted.

The parishes have [had no priest since March 2020](#), when Fr Grzegorz Rapa left expecting to be able to return. However, LPR officials repeatedly rejected all his and his bishop's attempts to be allowed to return. Fr Rapa, a Polish priest, has served in Luhansk since 1993.

"I'm very sad that they can't resolve their problems," Pomnikov told Forum 18. "Maybe there's a political reason why Fr Grzegorz has not been able to return, I don't know. Maybe he hasn't asked to return. But there is no artificial obstruction."

Forum 18 pointed out that [the LPR authorities had repeatedly rejected attempts](#) since 2020 to get permission for Fr Rapa's return. Pomnikov of the LPR Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department insisted that the situation is now different since the LPR's annexation by Russia. "If he wants to return he'll have to apply to the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation in accordance with Russian law."

Luhansk: Purge of educational establishment libraries

The LPR Education and Science Ministry has ordered a purge of libraries in educational establishments. On 20 January 2023, in a letter seen by Forum 18, acting minister Yevgeny Miroshnichenko instructed the heads of educational establishments to remove "literature of an extremist nature, expressing the ideology of Ukrainian nationalism" from their libraries.

The LPR had earlier [banned various texts as "extremist"](#), including in 2019 an edition of the Gospel of John in the widely-used Russian Synodal translation originally published in 1820.

Miroshnichenko of the LPR Education and Science Ministry supplied a list of 365 books to be removed. He also ordered libraries to remove a wide range of other literature, including anything about the holodomor (the Ukrainian famine in the 1930s caused by Stalin's policies), literature "propagandising European gender 'values'", literature on events in Ukraine since 2014, and all 90 books from Famous Ukrainians, a biographical series aimed at teenagers.

The Famous Ukrainians series includes a book on St Petro Mohyla, a 17th century Orthodox Metropolitan of Kyiv who was known for his educational and publishing activities, and a book on Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky. (Metropolitan Sheptytsky headed the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church until his death in 1944, and [protected Jews from the Holocaust](#) at a time when such acts were punishable by death.)

The list of "extremist" books to be removed also includes a book on Metropolitan

Sheptytsky by the former Soviet prisoner of conscience Myroslav Marynovych. "I believe in God and in Ukraine", by the former Soviet prisoner of conscience and Orthodox Christian Levko Lukyanenko, is also on the "extremist" book list.

Miroshnichenko of the LPR Education and Science Ministry ordered libraries to remove all such "extremist" books and put them in sealed boxes, and report on this to the Ministry by 24 January. Educational establishment heads who failed to do so would bear personal responsibility, he warned.

Yelena Bakhmut, the official who prepared the letter for Miroshnichenko, refused to discuss it. "Put your questions in writing," she told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 2 February. When Forum 18 began asking why books on St Petro Mohyla and Metropolitan Sheptytsky were among those ordered removed from educational institutions libraries, she put the phone down.

The Russian-imposed LPR Culture Minister Dmitry Sidorov told a meeting chaired by Russia's Culture Minister Olga Lyubimova on 20 January that public libraries have already removed "extremist" literature.

Oleg Pomnikov, the head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry, defended the removal from libraries of "extremist" books. "Sheptytsky was an active supporter of Nazism and of Ukrainian nationalism," he claimed to Forum 18. "The Greek Catholic Church supported the Banderists." He made no comment about St Petro Mohyla.

Natalya Rastorguyevka, director of the LPR's Gorky Universal Science Library, refused to discuss the removal of works the LPR and Russian government regards as "extremist" from local libraries. "You can argue about this issue for a long time," she told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 1 February. "But any questions must be submitted through the Culture Ministry."

Rastorguyevka refused to say if her library has, for example, removed any religious works on Russia's [Federal List of Extremist Materials](#).

The neighbouring Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) has also conducted such a book purge. In May 2022 the DPR Culture Ministry began a programme of [removing from public libraries literature that it regards as "extremist"](#). These included not only books on Ukrainian culture and history and books about Adolf Hitler, but books on "political and religious figures".

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly digest Jan 16-31

31.01.2023 - The Court keeps an elderly believer from Maykop in a pre-trial detention Center for months.

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/311614.html>

On January 17, 2023, the Maykop City Court refused to release **Nikolay Voishchev**, a 67-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Maykop, from custody, where he has been held for more than 3 months only because of the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses. He will stay in the pre-trial detention center for at least another six months, despite the disease discovered in him.

[Continue reading...](#)

29.01.2023 - The Supreme Lama of Kalmykia left his post after being declared a "foreign agent"

Kasparov.ru - Honorary Representative of the Dalai Lama in Russia, Mongolia and CIS countries Telo Tulku Rinpoche (Erdni Ombadykov) decided to leave the post of the supreme lama of Kalmykia after the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation declared him a "foreign agent". This is stated in his address on the website of the Central Khurul of the Republic.

"I wish the people of Kalmykia and all followers of Buddhism in these difficult times to maintain courage, fortitude and commitment to the ideals of compassion, love and non-violence on which our Buddha Teachings is based," the statement reads.

The Supreme Lama of Kalmykia handed over powers to the rector of the Kalmyk Central Buddhist monastery "Geden Sheddup Choi Korling" Geshe Tenjin Choydak (Mutul Ovyanov) and the administrator of the gelong Yonten Lodoy (Sergey Kirishov).

25.01.2023 - A Court in the Kemerovo Region sentenced a labor veteran to 6 years of suspended term for reading the Bible with friends

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/251425.html>

On January 24, 2023, the judge of the Kuznetsk District Court of Novokuznetsk (Kemerovo Region) Anton Iordan found the 65-year-old labor veteran guilty of extremism because of his religious views.

Sergey Sushilnikov and his wife have been living in Novokuznetsk for over 40 years. During this time, he repeatedly received certificates of honor and awards from the city administration and his employers. He has the title of labor veteran.

[Continue reading...](#)

24.01.2023 - Two trials, nine long jail terms

Eight of nine Jehovah's Witnesses convicted on "extremism"-related charges in two trials in Russia's Far East in December 2022 received jail terms of 6 to 7 years. An Amur Region Prosecutor's Office official justified the jailings: "Any missionary activity of members of a religious organisation liquidated by a court in connection with repeated violations of the law on countering extremist activity will be illegal in nature and subject to liability established by law." The 9 were among 124 Jehovah's Witnesses criminally convicted in 2022. Trials continue.

In two trials in mid-December 2022, two courts in Russia's Far East sentenced a total of 9 Jehovah's Witnesses to long jail terms. All but one received jail terms of between 6 and

7 years. The 9 men were among 19 Jehovah's Witnesses to receive general-regime prison terms in the last quarter of 2022.

[Continue reading...](#)

23.01.2023 - The Court of Cassation upheld the sentence of four believers from Volgograd.

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/231338.html>

On January 19, 2023, the Fourth General Jurisdiction Court of Cassation in Krasnodar did not change the guilty verdict and appeal ruling in the case of **Valeriy Rogozin, Igor Egozaryan, Sergey Melnik and Denis Peresunko**, who were sentenced to long terms for their faith as Jehovah's Witnesses.

[Continue reading...](#)

21.01.2023 - In Kamchatka, another foreign citizen fined for "illegal" missionary work

Sova Center - On January 20, 2023, the Elizovsky District Court of the Kamchatka Territory found the foreign citizen **Abdumashit Abduvaliev** guilty under Part 5 of Art. 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (implementation by a foreign citizen of missionary activity in violation of the requirements of the law) and fined him 30 thousand rubles.

According to the court, he, being in the temporary detention center for foreign citizens of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs for the Kamchatka Territory, "conducted religious ceremonies with the participation of at least 10-12 persons", without permits and not belonging to any religious organization. Abduvaliev admitted guilt.

20.01.2023 - Court of Appeal in Krasnoyarsk upheld the verdict against 56-year-old Yevgeniy Zinich.

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/200900.html>

On January 19, 2022, the Judicial Chamber for Criminal Cases of the Krasnoyarsk Regional Court upheld the verdict against **Yevgeniy Zinich**—6 years in a penal colony for reading the Bible. The believer still insists on his innocence and can appeal the verdict through the cassation process.

In addition to the term in the penal colony, Zinich is deprived of the right to engage in the organizational activity in public associations and religious organizations for 2 years and his freedom is limited for a year. After the verdict was announced, Yevgeniy spent six months in a pre-trial detention center, awaiting an appeal.

[Continue reading...](#)

19.01.2023 - A second appeal in Rostov-on-Don toughened the sentence for Arsen Avanesov.

Link to full text in Russian : <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/190846.html>

Recently it became known that back on August 8, 2022, the Rostov Regional Court toughened the punishment for one of the three believers from Rostov , Arsen Avanesov, who was previously sentenced to 6.5 years in a penal colony, adding another six months to the term.

In June 2022, the court of cassation in Krasnodar upheld the verdict against **Vilen Avanesov and Aleksandr Parkov**, but satisfied the prosecutor's request regarding Arsen. The believer was again charged with "financing extremist activity", a charge that the court had previously excluded. Later the case of Arsen Avanesov returned to the stage of appeal, where his sentence was toughened.

[Continue reading...](#)

19.01.2023 - The Yaroslavl City Hall is trying to sue the building of the pilgrimage center from the diocese

Sova Center - On January 17, 2023, it became known that the mayor's office of Yaroslavl filed a lawsuit against the Yaroslavl diocese with an arbitration court. The city authorities demand that the diocese's right of ownership to the building of the pilgrimage center on Bogoyavlenskaya Square be recognized as missing.

The building was transferred to the use of the diocese in 1994 for the purpose of reconstruction. At the same time, the diocese registered it as a property, which, according to the city authorities, was done in violation of the law.

[Continue reading...](#)

17.01.2023 - The appeal Court upheld the verdict against six believers from Saransk.

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/171601.html>

On January 16, 2023, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Mordovia upheld the sentence of six Jehovah's Witnesses from Saransk: 6 years imprisonment for **Atryakhin**, 4 years and 2 months in a penal colony for **the Nikulins**, and 2 years imprisonment for **Shevchuk, Korolev, and Antonov**.

[Continue reading...](#)

17.01.2023 - The Cassation Court did not change the sentence of five of Jehovah's Witnesses from Kursk.

Link to full text in Russian: <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/171448.html>

On January 12, 2023, the First Cassation Court of General Jurisdiction in Saratov left unchanged the verdict of the Promyshlennyy District Court of the city of Kursk and the appellate ruling of the Judicial Panel for Criminal Cases of the Kursk Regional Court against five of Jehovah's Witnesses.

[Continue reading...](#)

16.01.2023 - The court began consideration of the case of ex-shiigumen Sergiy (Romanov) and Vsevolod Moguchev

Sova center - On August 16, 2022, the Babushkinsky District Court of Moscow began considering the merits of the case of the former shiigumen **Sergiy (Romanov)** and his assistant **Vsevolod Moguchev**, accused under paragraph "c" of Part 2 of Art. 282 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (actions aimed at inciting hatred or enmity, committed publicly, including using the Internet, by an organized group).

They are charged with publishing videos aimed at inciting hatred towards Jews, Catholics and Muslims.

Both defendants plead not guilty.

[Continue reading...](#)

Special bimonthly: religious persecution and issues – Jan 01-15

13.01.2023 - The Court of Appeal canceled the recovery of 931 million rubles from the Catholic Archdiocese

Sova Center - On January 11, 2023, the Ninth Arbitration Court of Appeal overturned the decision of the Moscow Arbitration Court to recover 931 million rubles from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of the Mother of God in Moscow in favor of the Affordable Housing company.

The decision of the Court of Appeal came into force from the date of its adoption. Recall that the company represented the interests of a religious organization in the process of returning buildings in Milyutinsky Lane and demanded remuneration for its services in accordance with the contract, but the archdiocese refused to pay it. In October 2022, the Moscow Arbitration Court ordered the archdiocese to pay the required amount, but the appeal instance overturned this decision and ordered Affordable Housing LLC to pay the Catholics legal costs in the amount of three thousand rubles.

12.01.2023 - The Supreme Court of Russia partially satisfied the appeal of four Jehovah's Witnesses from Omsk. One of them has already served a full prison term for his faith.

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/120938.html>

On January 11, 2023, the Supreme Court of Russia considered the cassation complaint of Jehovah's Witnesses against the guilty verdict in the extremism case handed down on November 30, 2020 in Omsk and satisfied it in terms of revising the sentence served by **Sergey Polyakov**.

The Pervomaisky District Court of the city of Omsk more than 2 years ago sentenced Polyakov to 3 years in a penal colony, and 3 women were given a suspended sentence: **Anastasia Polyakova**—2.5 years, **Gaukhar Bektemirova**—2 years and 3 months, **Dinara Dyusekeyeva**—2 years. In May 2021, the appeal approved the verdict, and a year later this decision was upheld by the Eighth Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction in Kemerovo. In November 2022, Sergey Polyakov was released after serving his full term in a colony.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.01.2023 - The Court in Kyzyl sentenced Anatoliy Senin to six years suspended sentence for his faith.

Link to full text in Russian: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/120935.html>

Six years suspended sentence—with such a sentence on January 12, 2023, the consideration of the case of Anatoliy Senin in the Kyzyl city court ended. Judge Vyacheslav Kyzyl-ool considered the discussion of the Bible among fellow believers to be an organization of extremist activity.

The starting point for the criminal prosecution of the believer was the searches in Kyzyl in January 2021. Then **Anatoliy Senin** was detained, and then sent under house arrest for 56 days. The believer was accused of organizing the activities of an extremist organization. Investigator of the RF IC Olchi Ohemchik considered the broadcasting of video recordings of religious content, the inducement to pray, sing religious songs and study the Bible as extremist actions.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.01.2023 - Cassation sent the case of 71-year-old Lyudmila Salikova, for a new appeal

Link to full text in Russian - <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/120936.html>

On January 11, 2022, the Seventh Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction in Chelyabinsk overturned the appeal ruling against **Lyudmila Salikova**. An appeal against a verdict for the faith of a veteran of the nuclear industry and a veteran of labor will be considered by a different composition of the Court of Appeal.

"If the courts had correctly applied the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, they would have acquitted me," Lyudmila told the cassation court. "Communicating, reading and studying the Bible with my fellow believers, singing songs, praying, as well as telling others about my Bible-based beliefs, the investigation charged me with a crime."

[Continue reading...](#)

12.01.2023 - The deep Constitution of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church

Byu Law - Mikhail Antonov is a professor of law associated with the Law Faculty of the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Saint Petersburg.

At the formal level, the Russian Constitution provides a standard set of antidiscrimination guarantees that are similar to many constitutions of Western countries. It proclaims Russia to be a democratic Rechtsstaat (Article 1) and enumerates a solid list of inalienable rights and freedoms in Chapter 2. In particular, Article 13 guarantees ideological diversity and prohibits any state ideology; Article 14 establishes that Russia is a secular state in which there shall be no state or obligatory religion and that religious associations are separated from the State and equal before the law.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.01.2023 - Crimean imam sentenced to 17 years in prison

Sova center - On January 12, 2023, the Southern District Military Court in Rostov-on-Don found Crimean Imam Raif Fevziev guilty in the case of involvement in the radical Islamic party Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is recognized as a terrorist organization in Russia. He was sentenced to 17 years in prison, the first three years the imam will spend in prison, the rest of the term in a strict regime colony. As an additional punishment, restriction of freedom for one and a half years was appointed.

[Continue reading...](#)

11.01.2023 - Religious repression in Putin's Russia

Providence - While religion was formally abolished under the USSR, under Putin it has been repressed. Consequently, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom identified Russia as one of the world's worst violators of religious freedom.

In December 2021, just two months before the invasion of Ukraine, Russia's supreme Court dissolved the non-governmental agency (NGO) Memorial, which is the oldest and

most respected human rights organization in Russia and an outspoken supporter of religious freedom. Among other activities, the group was compiling a list of those imprisoned for alleged offenses related to religion. The dissolution of Memorial was seen as a warning to other activists, that they too could be prosecuted for speaking out against Putin's government.

[Continue reading...](#)

11.01.2023 - The Moscow Arbitration Court ordered the Catholic Archdiocese to pay a debt to a firm that helped return buildings

Sova center - On October 5, 2022, it became known that the Moscow Arbitration Court ordered the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of the Mother of God in Moscow to pay about 930 million rubles to the Affordable Housing company. In accordance with the agreement concluded in 2016, the company assumed the financial costs in a lawsuit to return the buildings in Milyutinsky Lane to the Catholics.

[Continue reading...](#)

11.01.2023 - The Kemerovo Court of Cassation upheld the conviction of Aleksandr Bondarchuk and Sergey Yavushkin—Four years suspended

Link to full text in Russian - <https://jw-russia.org/news/2023/01/111049.html>

On January 10, 2023, the Eighth Cassation Court of General Jurisdiction in Kemerovo upheld the conviction of Aleksandr Bondarchuk and Sergey Yavushkin - 4 years of suspended sentence. The hearing was held in person and was attended by 12 of the defendants' relatives and friends.

The court of first instance passed its sentence in June 2021, and in February 2022, the appeal left it unchanged. **Aleksandr Bondarchuk** and **Sergey Yavushkin** still do not agree with the charges against them, as they reported in their appeals: "Neither the verdict nor the appellate ruling provides clear criteria by which we can clearly see what specific actions we took were a continuation of illegal activities of a liquidated legal entity."

[Continue reading...](#)

10.01.2023 - Prosecutor General's Office: Banned translation of "Sahih al-Bukhari" contains distortions "in favor of Salafi ideas"

Sova Center - On January 9, 2023, the Coordinating Center for Muslims of the North Caucasus (KCMSC) published the response of the Prosecutor General's Office to a request regarding the recognition of the collection of hadiths "Sahih al-Bukhari" as extremist material.

Recall that one of the editions of this authoritative collection in a summary of the 15th-century imam al-Zubaidi (M.: Umma, 2007) was banned by a court in Tatarstan in December 2021. The decision stood in the court of appeal, after which the publication was included in the Federal List of Extremist Materials. The ban provoked a critical reaction from many Muslim figures.

[Continue reading...](#)

03.01.2023 - Moscow's former chief rabbi: 'The best option for Russian Jews is to leave'

JTA - Pinchas Goldshmidt, the former chief rabbi of Moscow who fled the country earlier this year, said other Russian Jews should leave before it's too late in an interview with the Guardian.

"When we look back over Russian history, whenever the political system was in danger you saw the government trying to redirect the anger and discontent of the masses towards the Jewish community," Goldschmidt told the Guardian. "We saw this in tsarist times and at the end of the Stalinist regime."

He argued that Russia's floundering invasion of Ukraine is starting to foster a similar environment.

[Continue reading...](#)

RUSSIA/ FAKE NEWS CORNER: "Ukraine is a Catholic conspiracy, the Pope is a monster and a thief," a Russian Orthodox leader says

Protodeacon Vladimir Vasilik defies ridicule by connecting the war to a plot by Pope Francis to incorporate Ukrainian Orthodox into the Catholic Church.

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (11.01.2023) - Protodeacon Vladimir Vasilik is not, as you may believe by reading its prose, a lonely madman. Not only is he a scholar who has published about Church history in [respected Western journals](#), but he is a member of the Russian Orthodox Church's powerful Synodal Liturgical Commission and a frequent contributor to church journals and magazines.

Vasilik took exception to Pope Francis's [Christmas message](#), where he invited those gathered in St. Peter's Square in Rome to look at the "faces of our Ukrainian brothers and sisters who are living this Christmas in the dark, in the cold or away from their homes because of the devastation caused by ten months of war."

While Pope Francis is usually more than moderate in his comments about the Ukrainian war, Vasilik expressed his anger that the Pope did not mention “the Russian brothers and sisters” who also die in the war. Thus, he [took the opportunity](#) to “unmask” the Pope and claim that the events in Ukraine ultimately are the results of a sinister plot by the Vatican.

Not only is the Catholic Church conspiring against Russia and Orthodoxy since the 16th century, Vasilik said, it has now become clear that the Vatican organized “the Maidan of 2014. For even the blind can see that the most ardent activists on the Maidan were Uniate Catholic priests [i.e., priests of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church].” Some of Vasilik’s colleagues—the Protodeacon is also [an anti-cult activist](#)—believe the 2014 Maidan had really been [organized by Scientology](#), but it is true that they did write that Catholics also cooperated.

Pope Francis is singled out as the mastermind of particularly sinister plots. He became Pope in 2013, and in 2014 the Maidan Revolution happened, an event that in Russian propaganda made the invasions of 2014 and 2022 unavoidable.

Francis, according to Vasilik, is “the main beneficiary” of what is happening in Ukraine. Why? Because the war situation is giving the Ukrainian government the pretext to suppress the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and merge it with the branch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that is in communion with the Patriarch of Constantinople.

However, Vasilik says, “there are long-term plans for the unification of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Roman Catholic Church. The year is already known—2025—the year of the anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council, which Catholic heretics and Greek traitors to Orthodoxy are going to celebrate in such a perverted way. And they decided to choose Ukraine as a testing ground for such an alliance. The idea is simple—the creation of a single national church of Ukraine. First, schismatic groups are driven into the so-called OCU [the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in communion with Constantinople], and then the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is attached to it, not willingly, but by hook or by crook. And then all this is connected with the Uniates. Thus, a single Ukrainian church of the Eastern rite is being created.”

Pope Francis, Vasilik says, is a monster, “a crocodile who, when he eats his prey, sheds tears incessantly, but eats, nonetheless. In the same way, the Pope of Rome can weep, lament, mourn. However, this will not stop him from eating the Orthodox—his work is such, more precisely, his nature is such. He is not the Pope, not a father, but he is a thief, a real thief. And ‘the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy’ (John 10:10).”

Protodeacon Vasilik has some [hope for the new year](#), tough. He hopes 2023 will bring peace. But peace, he explains, is “something we can acquire only through war.” Not the “commercial war” some Russian commanders fought in Ukraine—which explains, or so Vasilik believes, why they preferred to abandon Ukrainian cities rather than destroying their valuable infrastructures—but a full-fledged holy war. Either we win, Vasilik proclaims, or “we will disappear, as a country and a people. Or even disappear physically. In this case, we have only one choice: win or die. You cannot fight and trade at the same time. However, for some reason, these elementary truth did not sound convincing to some of our commanders. I wish then to sound the alarm for them, and tell them that in 2023 Russia will be renewed, cleansed of its sins—abortion, corruption, embezzlement, and the presence of atheists and cultists—, and finally of obscenity. Then, finally, Russia will become Holy Russia.

РОССИЯ/УГОЛОК ФЕЙКОВЫХ НОВОСТЕЙ: «Украина это католический заговор, Папа Римский изверг и вор», заявил лидер Русской православной церкви

Протоиерей Владимир Василик бросает вызов насмешкам, связывая войну с заговором Папы Франциска с целью присоединения православных украинцев к католической церкви.

Массимо Интровинье

[Bitter Winter](#) (11.01.2023) - Протоиерей Владимир Василик вовсе не одинокий сумасшедший, как можно подумать, читая его сочинения. Он не только ученый, публиковавшийся по истории Церкви в [авторитетных Западных журналах](#), но и член влиятельной Синодальной литургической комиссии Русской Православной Церкви и частый автор церковных журналов.

Василик возразил против [Рождественского послания](#) Папы Франциска, в котором последний призвал собравшихся на площади Святого Петра в Риме посмотреть на «лица наших украинских братьев и сестер, которые проживают это Рождество в темноте, на холоде или вдали от своих домов из-за разрушений, вызванных десятью месяцами войны».

В то время как Папа Франциск обычно более чем сдержан в своих комментариях об украинской войне, Василик выразил гнев по поводу того, что Папа не упомянул «российских братьев и сестер», которые также погибают на войне. Таким образом, он [воспользовался возможностью](#), чтобы «разоблачить» Папу и заявить, что события на Украине в конечном итоге являются результатом зловещего заговора Ватикана.

По словам Василика, мало того, что католическая церковь замышляет против России и православия с XVI века, теперь стало ясно, что Ватикан организовал «Майдан 2014 года». Ибо даже слепой видит, что самые ярые активисты на Майдане были униатские католические священники [т.е. священниками Украинской Греко-Католической Церкви]». Некоторые коллеги Василика — протоиереи [тоже антикультуристские активисты](#) — считают, что Майдан 2014 года в действительности был [организован саентологами](#), однако, в сотрудничестве с католиками.

Франциск, по словам Василика, является «главным бенефициаром» происходящего в Украине. Почему? Потому что военная ситуация дает украинскому правительству предлог для подавления Украинской Православной Церкви Московского Патриархата и слияния ее с отделением Украинской Православной Церкви, состоящим в общении с Константинопольским Патриархом.

Однако, говорит Василик, «есть долгосрочные планы по объединению Константинопольской патриархии и Римско-католической церкви. Уже известен и год — 2025 год — год юбилея I Вселенского Собора, который католические еретики и греческие предатели Православия собираются отметить таким извращенным образом. А в качестве полигона подобного соединения решили избрать Украину. Идея проста — создание единой национальной церкви Украины. Вначале сгоняют раскольнические группировки в так называемую ПЦУ [Православная церковь Украины в сопричастности с Константинополем], а затем к ней не добровольно, а всеми правдами и неправдами присоединяют Украинскую православную церковь

Московского патриархата. А затем все это соединяется с униатами. Таким образом, создается единая украинская церковь восточного обряда».

Папа Франциск, говорит Василий, — это чудовище, «крокодил, который, съедая свою жертву, слезит неспрестанно, однако, ест. Точно так же Папа Римский может рыдать, сетовать, скорбеть. Однако, поедать православных от этого он не перестанет — работа у него такая, точнее — природа у него такая. Он не папа, не отец, не батюшка, а татюшка, вор, тать. А «тать не приходит, разве да украдет, и убьет, и погубит» (Ин. 10:10)».

У протодиакона Василика есть твердая [надежда на новый год](#). Он надеется, что 2023 год принесет мир. Но мир, объясняет он, «это то, что мы можем обрести только с помощью войны». Не «коммерческая война», которую вели русские командиры в Украине, объясняет, по мнению Василика, почему они предпочитали покидать украинские города, а не разрушать их ценную инфраструктуру, — потому что это полноценная священная война.

Либо мы победим, провозглашает Василий, либо «исчезнем как страна и народ. Или даже исчезнем физически. В данном случае у нас есть только один выбор: победить или умереть. Нельзя одновременно воевать и торговать. Однако почему-то эти азбучные истины для некоторых официальных лиц не звучат убедительно. Желая, чтобы они для них зазвучали набатом, тогда в 2023 году Россия обновится, очистится от своих грехов — аборт, коррупции, казнокрадства, безбожия и сектантства, от мата, наконец. Тогда, наконец, Россия станет Святой Русью».

Массимо Интровинье (родился 14 июня 1955 года в Риме) — итальянский социолог религий. Он является основателем и управляющим директором Центра изучения новых религий ([CESNUR](#)), международной сети ученых, изучающих новые религиозные движения.

Интровинье является автором около 70 книг и более 100 статей в области социологии религии. Он был главным автором [Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia](#) (Энциклопедия религий в Италии). Он является членом редакционной коллегии [Междисциплинарного журнала исследований религии](#) и исполнительного совета издательства [Nova Religio](#) Калифорнийского университета. С 5 января по 31 декабря 2011 года он занимал должность «Представителя по борьбе с расизмом, ксенофобией и дискриминацией, уделяя особое внимание дискриминации в отношении христиан и представителей других религий» [Организации по безопасности и сотрудничеству в Европе \(ОБСЕ\)](#). С 2012 по 2015 год он был председателем Обсерватории [Религиозной Свободы](#), созданной Министерством иностранных дел Италии для наблюдения за проблемами [религиозной свободы](#) в мировом масштабе.

Протодиакон Владимир Василий. [кредит фото](#)

47 Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to prison terms in 2022

Since 2017, Russian authorities have placed over 500 Witnesses on the federal list of extremists and terrorists (!)

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (10.01.2023) – As of 31 December, 47 Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to a prison term. The last one, Alexander Filatov, got a six-year sentence on 28 December a few hours after the headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States had published a press release announcing a slightly lower figure.

Since 2017, Russian authorities have placed over 500 Witnesses on the federal list of extremists and terrorists. Russia is misemploying its anti-extremist legislation to ban, imprison, and at times, beat and torture Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses are peaceful, law-abiding citizens—anything but extremists—and thus have repeatedly condemned Russia for its unmistakable discrimination-based ban. Jehovah's Witnesses around the world are eager to see their fellow believers in Russia released from prison.

December (12)

Alexander Nikolayevich FILATOV, 38 years (6 years)

Sergey Panteleymonovich AFANASIYEV, 58 years (6 years and 6 months)

Sergey KARDAKOV, 38 years (6 months and 4 months)

Anton Yurievich OLSHEVSKIY, 35 years (6 years and 3 months)

Adam Mihaylovich SVARICHEVSKY, 59 years (6 years and 3 months)

Sergey Nikolaevich YERMILOV, 55 years (6 years and 3 months)

Sergey SHULYARENKO, 38 years (7 years)

Valeriy KRIEGER, 55 years (7 years)

Alam ALIYEV, 59 years (6 years and 6 months)

Dmitriy ZAGULIN, 49 years (3 years and 6 months)

Aleksandr Viktorovich LITVINYUK, 62 years (6 years)

Aleksandr Fedorovich DUBOVENKO, 49 years (6 years)

November (3)

Viktor Vladimirovich ZIMOVSKIY, 53 years (6 years and 2 months)

Aleksandr Ivanovich SEREDKIN, 67 years (6 years)

Andrey Emikovich DANIELYAN, 53 years (6 years)

October (7)

Vladimir BUKIN, 50 years (6 years and 6 months)

Sergey Vitaliyevich YUFEROV, 47 years (6 years and 6 months)

Valeriy SLASHCHEV, 41 years (6 years and 6 months)

Mikhail Ivanovich BURKOV, 39 years (6 years and 2 months)

Vladimir Ivanovich MALADYKA, 59 years (6 years)

Vladimir Fedorovich SAKADA, 52 years (6 years)

Yevgeniy Sergeyevich ZHUKOV, 53 years (6 years)

September (6)

Aleksey Valeriyevich DYADKIN, 33 years (7 years)

Nikita Valeriyevich MOISEYEV, 32 years (7 years)

Vladimir Nikolayevich POPOV, 55 years (7 years)

Yevgeniy Viktorovich RAZUMOV, 43 years (7 years)

Oleg Grigoriyevich SHIDLOVSKIY, 53 years (6 1/2 years)

Aleksey Vladimirovich GORELIY, 42 years (6 1/2 years)

August (6)

Vladimir ATRYAKHIN, 35 years (6 years)
Georgiy NIKULIN, 59 years (4 years and 2 months)
Yelena NIKULINA, 54 years (4 years and 2 months)
Aleksandr SHEVCHUK, 33 years (2 years)
Aleksandr KOROLEV, 42 years (2 years)
Denis ANTONOV, 46 years (2 years)

June (4)

Vladimir ERMOLAEV, 34 years (6 ½ years)
Alexander PUTINTSEV, 48 years (6 ½ years)
Igor MAMALIMOV, 46 years (6 years)
Evgeniy Nikolaevich ZINICH, 56 years (6 years)

May (2)

Andrey VLASOV, 53 years old (7 years)
Lyudmila Ivanovna SHCHEKOLDINA, 46 years (4 years and 1 month)

March (2)

Tatyana Yuriyevna VELIZHANINA, 50 years (1 year and 5 months) Released
Vladimir Viktorovich DESHKO, 55 years (1 year and 4 months) Released

February (1)

Anatoliy GORBUNOV, 64 years old (6 years)

January (4)

Yevgeny KOROTUN, 52 years old (7 years + 2 years of restricted freedom)
Anna SAFRONOVA, 57 years old (6 years)
Andrei KOLESNICHENKO, 52 years old (4 years + 1 year of restricted freedom)
Maksim BELTIKOV, 42 years old (2 years)

Photo courtesy: Jehovah's Witnesses

New records in 2022 in the campaign of persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

By Willy Fautré

[The European Times](#) (29.12.2022) - This year, Russian courts sentenced over 40% more Jehovah's Witnesses (45) to prison than last year (32). This resulted in a peak of 115 men and women in prison at one time—the most since the 2017 Supreme Court ruling that effectively banned the Witnesses' activities.

"Russia is now marking a new milestone of disgrace," **states Rachel Denber, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia Division.** "No one

should spend a second being prosecuted, let alone in prison, for the peaceful expression of their religious beliefs. It is never too late to stop these repressive and unlawful practices, to free all people imprisoned for their peaceful religious activity, and to quash the notorious Supreme Court ruling banning the Jehovah's Witnesses." (for comments by 11 additional experts from Europe, Russia, and the U.S., see subhead below: What do experts think?)

Persecution has intensified, despite a landmark ruling in June 2022 by the European Court of Human Rights declaring the 2017 ban on Jehovah's Witnesses as baseless violation of international human rights covenants that should be reversed. The Court directed Russia to halt all pending criminal proceedings against Jehovah's Witnesses and release those imprisoned. [See p. 85, §11 of judgment ([link](#)).] Just weeks ago, the Council of Europe's Secretary General urged Russia to comply with the ECHR's judgement, as it is obligated to do, and reverse the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses. [See p. 2 of letter ([link](#)).]

Jarrold Lopes, a spokesperson for Jehovah's Witnesses, stated:

"Since 2017, Russian authorities have placed over 500 Witnesses on the federal list of extremists and terrorists.* Russia is misemploying its anti-extremist legislation to ban, imprison, and at times beat and torture Jehovah's Witnesses. It's hard to believe this poorly veiled crackdown has continued for over five years. Numerous international experts, officials, and courts at the highest level have acknowledged that Jehovah's Witnesses are peaceful, law-abiding citizens—anything but extremists—and thus have repeatedly condemned Russia for its unmistakable discrimination-based ban. Jehovah's Witnesses around the world are eager to see their fellow believers in Russia released from prison so they can be free to raise their children, free to support their communities, and free to worship as they are in over 230 other lands across the globe."

* Being on the list—which is publicly accessible—stigmatizes them and has prevented many from getting jobs. Other burdensome consequences include having their bank accounts blocked and having difficulty obtaining or renewing insurance policies, selling property, managing investments, receiving inheritances, or even purchasing mobile phone SIM cards.

Russia's persecution of JW's in 2022 by the numbers (as of December 23, 2022)

- **121** convicted for so-called extremist activity and sentenced to various penalties. This figure has steadily increased—**18** in 2019; **39** in 2020; and **111** in 2021
- **45** sentenced to prison to a total of **250** years in prison. This is more than a **40% increase** to the 32 sentenced to prison in 2021
 - **35** out of the 45 were sent to prison for six years

- In September 2022, the number of Witnesses in prison at one time **exceeded 100 for the first time** since the 2017 Supreme Court ruling. As of Dec. 23, 2022, there was a **peak of 115 behind bars**
 - **19** in prison are **over the age of 60**
 - **Oldest** is **Boris Andreev, 71**, from Primorye Territory. He was 70 when ordered to pretrial detention in October 2022 ([link](#))
 - The most inhumane sentence in 2022 is **7 years for Andrey Vlasov**, who is disabled and struggles to manage daily activities without assistance ([link to video](#))
 - A total of **367** believers have spent some time behind bars since May 2017
- **200** searches of JW homes conducted this year in **39** localities of Russia
 - Over **1,800** homes have been searched since 2017 ban, leading to criminal investigations or charges filed against more than **670** Witnesses
- Criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses have been filed in **72** regions of Russia by the end of 2022—this is two more than in 2021

Photo: The former Russian branch property of Jehovah's Witnesses that was confiscated by the Russian government after the ban in 2017. It included 14 buildings on more than 100,000 square meters (1,076,391 sq ft) of land on the outskirts of St. Petersburg. Courtesy: Jehovah's Witnesses
