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630 places of worship destroyed or damaged by the war

Russia continues to torture priests and destroy Ukrainian churches – IRF released new report in [English](#) and in [Ukrainian](#)

THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION

on faith-based communities in Ukraine



[IRF](#) (29.03.2024) - During the full-scale invasion, Russian troops damaged or wholly destroyed at least 630 churches, prayer houses, and other religious facilities in Ukraine.

The Institute for Religious Freedom published this new data in the report **“The Impact of the Russian Invasion on Faith-Based Communities in Ukraine.”** The IRF research contains the results of monitoring and surveys on the situation of Ukrainian religious communities in the territories occupied by Russia.

- The report in English: <https://bit.ly/2024-IRF-Report-Ukraine-en>
- The summary of the report in English: <https://bit.ly/2024-IRF-Summary-Ukraine-en>
- The report in Ukrainian: <https://bit.ly/2024-IRF-Report-Ukraine-ua>

In addition, IRF recorded seventeen interviews with religious leaders of various denominations about Russian war crimes in Ukraine. These video testimonies are available for watching on YouTube with English subtitles: <https://bit.ly/2022-IRF-video-testimonies>

Oleksandr Zaiets, Board Chairman of the Institute for Religious Freedom, project manager

The Kremlin uses religion, particularly Russian religious centers, as a tool of war against Ukraine. In addition to propagating hatred of Ukrainians, the Russian authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine often practice arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, torture, and even murder of Ukrainian religious leaders. Those priests, pastors, imams, etc., who did not agree to collaborate and refused to submit to Russian religious centers are subject to repression.

The IRF report states that most damage was inflicted by Russian missiles, kamikaze drones, and artillery, including targeted attacks on civilian objects. In addition, some places of worship have been deliberately looted by the Russian military, closed, or converted by the occupying authorities into administrative buildings.

Most churches, prayer houses, synagogues, and mosques were destroyed in Donetsk region (at least 146), Luhansk region (at least 83), and Kherson region (at least 78). The destruction in Kyiv region, where Russian troops attempted to capture the capital of Ukraine in February-March 2022, was also enormous (73). Due to the ongoing hostilities, the number of destroyed buildings is increasing in Kharkiv region (at least 62),

Zaporizhia region (at least 51), and Mykolaiv region (at least 41).

On a confessional basis, Orthodox churches suffered most damage from the Russian aggression – at least 246 in total. Of these, the churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate) suffered the most – at least 187. Also, 59 churches of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine were destroyed or damaged.

The scale of destruction and looting of evangelical churches is also extensive – at least 206 in total. Among them, the Pentecostal (94), Baptist (60), and Seventh-day Adventist Church (27) prayer houses suffered the most.

Dr. Maksym Vasin, Executive Director of the Institute for Religious Freedom, author of the report, Ph.D. in Law

It is most likely that if Russia retains control over the occupied territories of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions throughout 2024 and beyond, Ukrainian churches and religious communities in these regions will face the same fate as believers in the parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions occupied since 2014. The Russian occupying authorities will continue to fight any manifestations of dissent, opposition, and Ukrainian identity, particularly religious identity, by enforcing repressive Russian legislation.

Hiding behind slogans of protecting Russian speakers, "denazification," and "desatanization" of Ukraine, the Kremlin has actually been implementing the ideology of the "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World). As interpreted by Russian propagandists, this ideology comprises the physical destruction of the Ukrainian people as a nation (genocide), the elimination of Ukrainian cultural heritage, the overthrow of the Ukrainian government, and the disappearance of the Ukrainian state.

Recommendations

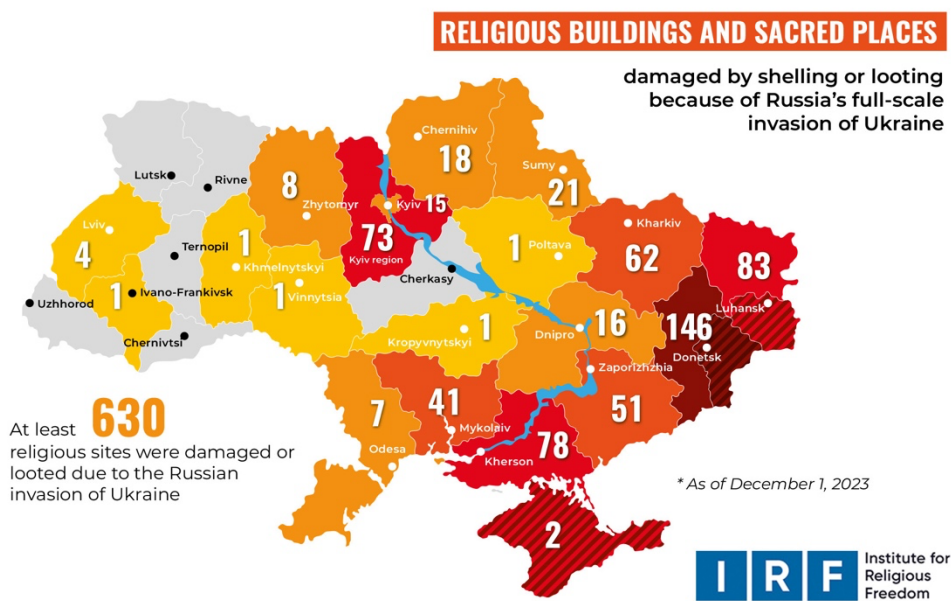
The Institute for Religious Freedom formulated several recommendations in the report. Among them are the following:

1. To publicly condemn the Russian World ideology and the position of the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, as well as other Russian religious associations and leaders who participate in the Russian aggression and justify it or promote hatred and genocide of the people of Ukraine.
2. To strongly and proactively support Ukraine's efforts to investigate Russian war crimes and prosecute all war criminals.
3. To introduce personal sanctions against Russian officials, religious leaders, media workers, and other individuals responsible for justifying or carrying out repressions against Ukrainian religious leaders and faith-based communities on the Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia.
4. To designate the Russian Federation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, considering the constant attacks on the civilian population and critical infrastructure of Ukraine, deliberate exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis, nuclear blackmail, the use of torture, inhuman treatment of prisoners of war, and arbitrarily imprisoned civilians, particularly religious figures.

Footnote

The Institute for Religious Freedom has prepared a report, "The Impact of the Russian Invasion on Faith-Based Communities in Ukraine," as part of [the Locked Faith project](#) with the support of the peacebuilding organization PAX (Netherlands) in cooperation with Mission Eurasia (USA), the Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine) and representatives of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations.

This is the fourth report on Russian war crimes against religious communities prepared with the assistance of the Institute for Religious Freedom since the beginning of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. Before that, in September 2022, the IRF published the report "[Russian Attacks on Religious Freedom in Ukraine.](#)" In 2018, the report "[Religious Freedom at Gunpoint: Russian Terror in the Occupied Territories of Eastern Ukraine](#)" was published. In 2015, with the participation of the IRF, a coalition of human rights organizations published the report "[When God Becomes the Weapon.](#)"
 Infographics: IRF Ukraine / irf.in.ua



Jehovah's Witness Tatyana Piskareva, 67, sentenced to 2 years and 6 months of forced labor

She was just participating in a religious worship online. Earlier, her husband Vladimir received six years in prison on similar charges.

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

[The European Times](#) (27.03.2024) - Tatyana Piskareva, a pensioner from Oryol, was found guilty of participating in the activities of an "extremist" organization because of her faith. On March 1, 2024, Dmitriy Sukhov, judge of the Sovetskiy District Court of Oryol, sentenced her to 2 years and 6 months of forced labor.

Her case is part of the persecution of other family members: Tatyana's husband, [Vladimir](#), received 6 years in prison under an anti-extremism article of the criminal code and is now awaiting an appeal. He was arrested after searches in December

2020 and has been behind bars ever since. There he suffered several hypertension crises and a stroke; he was diagnosed with coronary artery disease.

Tatyana said: "I wanted to help my husband when he had a crisis, and I could not help in any way. It was painful to watch the inaction of the pre-trial detention center."

The Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation opened a case against Piskareva in October 2021. She was accused of participating in worship services via a video conference. The trial began a year and a half later. At the hearing, it turned out that 11 of the 13 prosecution witnesses did not know the believer.

"I love all people regardless of their nationality, race, color and language, religion and other beliefs. I hate extremism in any of its manifestations," Tatyana said during the trial. "I am a Jehovah's Witness, and this is not a crime."

Islamic State: From religiously motivated hatred of 'infidels' to terrorism

Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (27.03.2024) - 139 Russians are known to have died in the worst terrorist attack for two decades on the Russian soil, perpetrated on 22 March in the Crocus City Hall in Moscow.

The Islamic State has publicly claimed responsibility for the attack, praising the "Islamic fighters" who carried it out and it has repeated its claim after the Kremlin had started accusing the sole Ukraine for sponsoring it, an outrageously unfounded statement. Moscow's stubborn denial to recognize the hand of the Islamic State in the terrorist attack might exacerbate their hatred towards Russia for stealing their "victory" from them and lead to more acts of terrorism in retaliation.

Concerts of modern Western music for young people are abhorred as places of perdition by the Islamists. They are a privileged target as it was previously shown by a terrorist attack against a concert attended by 1500 young people in the Bataclan theatre in November 2015 in Paris.

The religious-political ideology of the Islamic State

The priority targets of the Islamic State leaders are Muslim majority states which 'compromise' with other countries, especially in the West, or do not implement the shariah as they understand it in its most repressive form. Even Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban is considered ideologically corrupted.

The Islamic State operates under a global offensive jihad to cleanse "its own" territory of both foreign infidels—nonbelievers of Islam—and apostates and the group endorses violence against local Muslims if they object to the strict adherence to sharia and do not conform to its dogma.

Their other main enemy includes countries with Christian majority populations and the states that they support. Here the Islamic State puts Russia and its allies in the same bag as Western countries as it does not make any distinction between all these 'infidels.' No doubt the Islamic State contemplates with pleasure two blocs of Christian majority countries fighting against each other and waits for windows of opportunities to exploit their weaknesses.

Russia is also the enemy of the Islamic State because of its support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, its war against Muslims in Afghanistan in the 20th century and its wars in Chechnya.

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP): more extremist than the Taliban

In the terrorist attack perpetrated in the concert hall in Moscow, US officials have pointed to the Islamic State (IS) affiliate called "Islamic State Khorasan Province" (IS-KP) as prime suspect – though so far there is no evidence that this is the case. The IS-KP has not itself claimed responsibility for the attack in Moscow. This message has come from the IS central communications channels.

The IS-KP is a branch of the IS across parts of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Central Asia, a region called in the past Khorasan. It adheres to the broader IS ideology, which seeks to establish a global, transnational caliphate governed by Islamic jurisprudence. In 2016, the IS issued a paper entitled "Islamic State Creed and Methodology of Takfir", which stated that anyone who rejects sharia law will be labeled as *kafir* (an apostate) and can be executed as a result.

In its fight against the "near enemy" (apostates in its region), the IS-KP has launched numerous attacks on members of Afghanistan's Hazara Shia minority.

The IS-KP's commitment not to compromise with the West initially attracted some disgruntled Taliban members condemning the Taliban's peace negotiations with the United States, the Western "crusaders." In 2021, the IS-KP specifically vowed retaliation against this peace deal and refuses to acknowledge the Taliban as a legitimate Islamic power.

The IS-KP and Russia

The brutal attack in Moscow is not the first time the IS-KP has targeted Russia.

In September 2022, ISKP militants claimed responsibility for a deadly suicide bombing at the Russian embassy in Kabul and some experts say the group has opposed the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, in recent years. Michael Kugelman, of the Washington-based Wilson Center, said the IS-KP "sees Russia as being complicit in activities that regularly oppress Muslims" and counts as members a number of central Asian militants with their own grievances against Moscow.

Some analysts say they believe the IS-KP has targeted Russia over what the terrorist group views as the Russian government's oppression of Muslims, including in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Syria.

Some terrorist attacks by IS-KP

The IS-KP has significant disagreements with the Taliban, which it views as having abandoned jihad. It has launched [hundreds of attacks](#) on mosques, civilian targets and security forces in Afghanistan as well as ethnic or religious minorities.

In May 2020, the IS-KP attacked a Kabul maternity ward that killed 24 people and another one on Kabul University in November that left 22 people dead.

On 26 August 2021, the IS-KP carried out an attack at Kabul's international airport, killing 13 U.S. troops and 170 Afghans during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. This was an international target but still in Afghanistan.

The group has recently hit targets in neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, in Tajikistan and Pakistan. In January last, the group was said to have carried out twin bombings in Iran that killed nearly 100 people – but the IS-KP never claims responsibility.

KP in a few dates

IS-KP emerged in Afghanistan in late 2014. The group is named after an old term for the region that included parts of Iran, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan.

It was formed at the peak of the expansion of the Islamic State in 2015 when the Iraq- and Syria-based group was trying to expand by building a network of affiliates through the Middle East, the Maghreb, west Asia and other parts of Africa.

The IS-KP was founded by disgruntled members of the Pakistani Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and other groups who were attracted by the extremism and resources of the Islamic State and pledged allegiance to it.

In January 2015, the Islamic State formed its “Khorasan” province and appointed Hafiz Khan Saeed as the first IS-KP emir. Khan Saeed had previously served as a commander with responsibility for ‘operations’ in Orakzai in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

In 2018, the IS-KP membership peaked in but afterwards dropped, partly because of efforts by the Taliban and the United States to dismantle it.

In May 2019, the Islamic State announced the existence of new provinces in Pakistan and India—areas which had previously fallen under IS-KP’s geographic remit.

In June 2020, the Islamic State appointed Shahab al-Muhajir as IS-KP’s new emir following the capture of his predecessor, Aslam Farooqi.

In June 2021, the United Nations estimated that IS-KP consisted of a core group of fighters numbering between 1,500 and 2,200 active in the Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar. These fighters were dispersed into relatively autonomous cells operating under the Islamic State banner and ideology.

Korean missionary on espionage charges

The Korean Christian Public Policy Association urges his immediate release

[Christian Daily](#) (19.03.2024) - On March 19th, the Korean Christian Public Policy Association, led by Chairman Pastor So Kang-seok, issued a statement “condemning the Russian government for arresting a Korean missionary on espionage charges and urge his immediate release.”

In the statement, the association said, “It was not until March that the Russian Federal Security Service became aware that a Korean missionary who had been doing missionary work in the Russian Far East and the Primorsky Krai for the past several years was

arrested on espionage charges in January of this year and is currently being detained in a detention center in Moscow.”

They said, “Russia claims that a Korean missionary is suspected of passing on Russian state secrets to a foreign intelligence agency. However, the currently detained Korean missionary is a Protestant missionary who has been providing humanitarian aid to North Korean workers for the past several years, and is a pure missionary and activist who has worked to protect the human rights of North Korean workers.”

“So far, the Russian government has not provided an explanation as to how the missionary acquired state secrets, what type of content was obtained, and through what route and to which country he leaked them,” the association said. “Based on the missionary’s activities and experience, the Russian government’s argument is unconvincing, and we cannot avoid the suspicion that the Russian government is arbitrarily enforcing the law in consideration of its diplomatic and political relations with South Korea and North Korea.”

The statement continues by highlighting, “Article 1 of the Russian Constitution declares that it is a country ruled by law, and Article 28 of the Constitution stipulates that religious freedom is guaranteed to all individuals.”

“In particular, freedom of religion includes the right to believe in the religion of one’s choice, the right to change one’s religion, and the right to spread it,” it said.

Regarding the detention of Korean missionaries, the association stated that “it is not only a violation of the universal human rights norms stipulating freedom of religion, but also a direct violation of the Russian Constitution, so they should be released immediately.”

“Our government must also fulfill its obligation to protect its citizens under Article 2, Paragraph 2 and Article 10, Paragraph 1 of our Constitution,” the association said. “We will actively provide legal assistance to ensure the safety and release of missionaries currently in detention.”

The association called on the South Korean government to take action: “We urge you to take the necessary steps to resolve the issue by mobilizing all diplomatic channels available.”

Originally published by [Christian Daily Korea](#), translated by CDI.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest March 01-15

15.03.2024 - The Court in Chuvashia announced the verdict for faith to one of the oldest prisoners of conscience.

JW - On March 15, 2024, the case against one of Jehovah's Witnesses, **Yuriy Yuskov**, who will become 86 less than in a month, was completed in the Novocheboksarsk City Court of the Chuvash Republic. Judge Aleksandr Zubov sentenced him to 5 years of suspended sentence with a 4-year probation period and 1 year and 4 months of restriction of freedom.

According to the investigation, Yuriy Yuskov is guilty of participating in the activities of an extremist organization and involvement in it, as he "carried out preaching activities, conducting conversations and teaching religious teaching." He was also accused, without evidence, of promoting the rupture of family relations.

[Continue reading...](#)

14.03.2024 - The state prosecutor requested punishment for Jehovah's Witnesses from Votkinsk

Sova - On March 11, 2024, in the Votkinsk District Court of the Udmurt Republic, the state prosecutor requested punishment for Jehovah's Witnesses Sergei Gobozev and Mikhail Potapov, accused of organizing the activities of an extremist organization (Part 1 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code).

The prosecutor asked to sentence them to six and a half years of imprisonment in a general regime colony. In addition, the state prosecutor requested additional penalties in the form of a five-year deprivation of the right to engage in activities related to participation in the work of religious organizations, as well as one year of restriction of freedom.

[Continue reading...](#)

13.03.2024 - Religious freedom survey, March 2024

Forum 18 - Freedom of religion and belief, with interlinked freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and other fundamental freedoms remain seriously restricted in Russia. Forum 18's survey analysis ahead of the forthcoming presidential election documents freedom of religion or belief violations including: "extremism"-related criminal prosecutions and jailings of Jehovah's Witnesses and of Muslims who meet to study the works of Said Nursi; torture, and impunity for torture; prisoners of conscience deprived of Russian citizenship and deported after their sentence; and prosecuting, fining, and jailing Russians who protest against Russia's invasion of Ukraine from a religious perspective.

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11.03.2024 - Court in Maykop sentenced Inver Siyukhov to six years in prison for talking about Jehovah God

JW - On March 7, 2024, Bella Stash, judge of the Maykop City Court of the Republic of Adygea, sentenced one of Jehovah's Witnesses — **Inver Siyukhov**, 49, — to 6 years in prison in a penal colony. The court equated the exercise of the right to profess one's religion with the organization of the activities of an extremist organization.

In addition, the court deprived the believer of the right to engage in educational activities and activities related to leadership and participation in religious public associations and organizations for a period of four years, and also imposed restriction of liberty for a period of one year after serving the main sentence.

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11.03.2024 - The case against the publication of the Falun Dafa Information Center was dropped

Sova - On February 8, 2024, the St. Petersburg City Court canceled the decision of the Kalininsky District Court of St. Petersburg dated November 17, 2023 imposing a fine of 50 thousand rubles on the periodical publication of the Falun Dafa Information Center. The case was sent for a new trial.

The district court found the publication guilty under Art. 20.33 of the Administrative Code (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). The offense was that the Falun Dafa Information Center "posted information about international non-governmental organizations affiliated and controlled by Falun Gong," included in the list of undesirables in Russia.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.03.2024 - The FSB reported that an attack on a synagogue in Moscow was stopped

Sova - On March 7, 2024, the Public Relations Center of the Federal Security Service reported that in the Kaluga region, the activities of a cell of the terrorist organization ISIS in Afghanistan, banned in Russia, "Vilayat Khorasan", whose members were planning to commit a terrorist act in Moscow, were suppressed.

According to the department, they planned to shoot synagogue parishioners with firearms.

They were identified when they collected the necessary information. When detained, the attackers offered armed resistance and were eliminated by return fire. A criminal case has been opened regarding the preparation of a terrorist attack. Firearms, ammunition, and components for making an improvised explosive device were found and confiscated from the suspects."

07.03.2024 - 9 Jehovah's Witnesses convicted of extremism for practicing faith in Russia

Religion news - Nine Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted of extremism by a Russian court on Tuesday (March 5), receiving sentences of up to seven years in a penal colony for practicing their faith. Of those convicted, eight had already served more than two years in pretrial detention, often in solitary confinement, according to a spokesperson for the Jehovah's Witnesses. They plan to appeal the decision.

"Either I am one of Jehovah's Witnesses or I am an extremist. It is impossible to be both at the same time," Aleksey Solnechny said in Russian at court on Jan. 24, where he received a seven-year sentence. "And I declare: I am one of Jehovah's Witnesses, but I am not an extremist!"

[Continue reading...](#)

06.03.2023 - In Magadan, the Court sentenced 13 Jehovah's Witnesses to suspended sentences from 3 to 7 years

JW - One of the most massive cases for the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, in which the investigation and trial lasted almost six years, ended in a guilty verdict. On March 6, 2024, Judge Tatyana Belayeva of the Magadan City Court sentenced believers aged 31 to 73 to a suspended sentence.

Sergey Yerkin, Konstantin Petrov and Ivan Puyda received 7 years, Yevgeniy Zyablov received 5 years, Sergey Agadzhanov, Viktor Revyakin, Mikhail and Oksana Solntsev, Irina Khvostova, Lyubov Asatryan, Galina Dergacheva, Inna Kardakova and Galina Pechko received 3 years — all suspended with a probationary period of 2 to 5 years. As an additional punishment, believers were assigned restriction of freedom from 10 months to 1 year.

[Continue reading...](#)

06.03.2024 - A Court in Oryol sentenced Tatyana Piskareva, 67, to two years and six months of forced labor for participating in peaceful worship.

JW - **Tatyana Piskareva**, a pensioner from Oryol, was found guilty of participating in the activities of an extremist organization because of her faith. On March 1, 2024, Dmitriy Sukhov, judge of the Sovetskiy District Court of Oryol, sentenced her to 2 years and 6 months of forced labor.

The believer's case continues the trend of persecuting several family members at once: Tatyana's husband, Vladimir, received 6 years in prison under an extremist article and is now awaiting an appeal. He was arrested after searches in December 2020 and has been behind bars ever since. There he suffered several hypertensive crises and a stroke; he was diagnosed with coronary artery disease. Tatyana said: "I wanted to help my husband when he had a crisis, and I could not help in any way. It was painful to watch the inaction of the pre-trial detention center."

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06.03.2024 - The Muslim community in Samara obtained ownership of a mosque through the court

Sova - On February 27, 2024, it became known that the Arbitration Court of the Samara Region satisfied the claim of the local Muslim religious organization "Name of Khusain" against the department of urban planning, the mayor's office and the administration of the Kuibyshevsky district of Samara for recognition of ownership of the mosque building on Kryazhskoe Highway.

The religious organization went to court in the summer of 2023.

The site on the Kryazhskoye Highway was provided to the community in 1992, at which time a permit was issued for the construction of a mosque. The building was built, connected to communications, and in 2020 put on cadastral registration.

The Samara City Hall indicated in its response that it leaves the issue of recognition of ownership rights to the discretion of the court. An examination carried out as part of the trial established that the building complies with current urban planning standards and regulations, sanitary and epidemiological standards and fire safety requirements. The court granted the claim of the religious organization.

05.03.2024 - One more sentence for faith in Tolyatti. The Court gave a suspended sentence to 62-year-old Yelena Kozhevnikova

JW - On March 4, 2024, the judge of the Central District Court of the city of Tolyatti, Irina Onuchina, found Yelena Kozhevnikova guilty of extremism and sentenced her to 2 years of suspended sentence for "active participation in the activities of the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses through video conferencing."

The prosecutor requested 4 years of imprisonment for the believer.

In her attitude to the accusation, Kozhevnikova stated that she does not pose any public danger, as she respects people of any nationality and religion, the laws of the state. "This is taught by the Bible, which for me is the most important law," the believer emphasized. "I do not think that talking about God and biblical principles in any way violates the constitutional order or poses a threat to state security."

[Continue reading...](#)

01.03.2024 - The Court in Teykovo considered the usual religious practice of Jehovah's Witnesses to be extremism.

JW - On February 29, 2024, the judge of the Teikovo District Court of the Ivanovo Region, Sergey Kochetkov, sentenced Vladimir Spivak, Aleksandr Vasichkin, Sergey Galyamin and Anatoliy Lyamo to large fines for their religion.

None of the convicts pleaded guilty. They can appeal the verdict. The state prosecutor asked to impose fines from 700,000 to 1,200,000 rubles on the men. The court fined the believers slightly less: Vladimir Spivak 600,000, Sergey Galyamin 650,000, Aleksandr Vasichkin and Anatoliy Lyamo 1,100,000 rubles each.

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Nine Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to three to seven years in prison

By Willy Fautré

[The European Times](#) (07.03.2024) On 5 March, a Russian court in Irkutsk convicted nine Jehovah's Witness men, sentencing them from three to seven years of prison. The case began in 2021, when officers raided some 15 homes, beating and torturing at least 4 people (details below). Eight of the nine men convicted have been in pretrial detention for nearly 2.5 years, most spending the majority of the time in solitary confinement. They report receiving 150-200 letters of support from friends and family each month!

- 7 years — **Yaroslav Kalin** (54), **Sergey Kosteyev** (63), **Nikolay Martynov** (65), **Mikhail Moysh** (36), **Aleksey Solnechniy** (47), **Andrey Tolmachev** (49)
- 6 years, 4 months – **Igor Popov** (36) and **Denis Sarazhakov** (35)
- 3 years – **Sergei Vasiliyev** (72)

Jarrold Lopes, a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses, stated in a press release: *"There is no logical reasonable basis for having these good men imprisoned, separated from their wives and friends. The charges were largely based on secret audio recordings of worship services, where the men were praying, singing Christian songs, and reading from the Bible. Ironically, one of the passages read was Psalm 34:14: "Seek peace and pursue it." What does it say about a legal system that convicts people of extremist activity for reading a Bible verse that promotes peace? It's patently absurd. It would be a joke if the consequences weren't so serious. We implore Russian officials to reconsider its misconceptions about Jehovah's Witnesses and allow these peace-loving men and women to worship freely in their beloved homeland as Witnesses do in some 240 other lands."*

Case History

October 4, 2021. About 6 am., dozens of armed national guard officers and special forces soldiers raided 13 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses. Two men were beaten and tortured (see [link](#) to video interview).

- At the home of **Anatoly** and **Greta Razdobarov**, officers forced their way into the couple's bedroom. The officers dragged Greta by her hair into another room, handcuffed her with her arms behind her back, and repeatedly hit her. Meanwhile, Anatoly was stripped naked, forced to the floor, handcuffed with his arms behind his back, and kicked in the head and abdomen. Officers grabbed his handcuffed hands and wrenched him up off the ground. Anatoly writhed in pain as the weight of his body hyperextended his shoulders. Officers beat his hands while demanding that he incriminate himself and divulge information about the brothers. Officers further tortured him by trying to force a glass bottle into his buttocks. The raid on the Razdobarov's home lasted over eight hours.
- At the home of **Nikolay** and **Liliya Merinov**, officers entered and immediately struck Nikolay in the face with a heavy, blunt object. He fell to the floor and passed out. Upon regaining consciousness, he found an officer sitting on top of him, beating him. The officer broke Nikolay's front teeth. Liliya was dragged out of bed by her hair and handcuffed. The officers then repeatedly physically assaulted her before eventually allowing her to get properly dressed.

October 5, 2021. Yaroslav Kalin, Sergey Kosteyev, Nikolay Martynov, Mikhail Moysh, Alexey Solnechniy and Andrey Tolmachev were placed in pretrial detention, while Sergei Vasiliyev was ordered to house arrest.

November 30, 2021. Security officials purposely crashed into Denis Sarazhakov's car in the yard to get his attention. One of the officials pretended to be drunk. When Denis opened the door to investigate, the officers knocked him to the floor and began to search the home (village of Askiz, Republic of Khakassia). Dennis was detained and taken 1500 km to Irkutsk. On the same day, at about 3 am., security forces in Mezhdurechensk (Kemerovo Region) raided the home of Igor Popov and detained him.

December 29, 2022. The criminal trial began (See [link](#) for additional details).

Nationwide Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and Crimea

Since Russia's Supreme Court banned the Witnesses' activities in April 2017

- 2,083 homes of Witnesses were raided across 74 regions
- 794 men and women were criminally charged
- 506 men and women were added to the federal list of extremists and terrorists (Rosfinmonitoring)
- 415 men and women have spent some time behind bars, with 128 currently in prison.

(*) Note: The Razdobarovs and Merinovs were not criminally charged, along with the men involved in the 5 March verdict. Both men were involved as Witnesses

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest February 16-29

01.03.2024 - Russia jails Jehovah's Witness for 8 years after 'mole' secretly films worship meeting

Reuters - A court in southwestern Russia has sentenced a Jehovah's Witness to eight years in prison after finding him guilty of organising "extremist activities", according to a spokesman for the group.

Russia's Supreme Court designated the Christian denomination as "extremist" in 2017, liquidating and banning its nearly 400 chapters across the country.

Russia counted roughly 175,000 active believers at the time of the ban, according to the group's Russian website. Since then, raids, interrogations and jailings of adherents have occurred with some regularity.

[Continue reading...](#)

29.02.2024 - Regional Court upholds suspended sentence for Bible talks for elderly believer from Kostroma

JW - On February 21, 2024, **Valentina Samus**, 74, appeared before the Court of Appeal for her faith. The Collegium of the Kostroma Regional Court approved the sentence of the first instance - 6 years suspended. The believer can appeal this decision to the court of cassation.

According to Samus, her actions were peaceful, and the charge does not contain any indication of any calls for violence or religious hatred and enmity.

"The court found me guilty not for committing a crime, but for my religious beliefs, for my peaceful and law-abiding way of life, for a sincere desire to selflessly help other people, talking about what I myself learned from the Bible," Valentina said in her final

statement. "In fact, the court forbade me to practice the unforbidden religion of Jehovah's Witnesses and to worship God according to biblical canons."

[Continue reading ...](#)

27.02.2024 - Russian beaten by Chechen leader's son is jailed for Koran burning

Reuters - A Russian man who publicly burnt a copy of the Koran was jailed for three and a half years on Tuesday in the Russian region of Chechnya.

The case of **Nikita Zhuravel** drew international attention last year when Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov published a video in which his son Adam was shown beating and kicking the defendant while he was in prison awaiting trial.

Russian media outlet SOTA Vision published video showing Zhuravel standing in a white-barred courtroom cage to listen to the sentence.

[Continue reading...](#)

27.02.2024 - The state prosecutor requested punishment for Jehovah's Witnesses from the Krasnodar region

Sova - The state prosecutor asked that **Pavel Sidorenko** be sentenced to three years of suspended imprisonment.

On February 21, 2024, in the Goryacheklyuchevsky City Court of the Krasnodar Territory, a debate was held between the parties in the case of Jehovah's Witness Pavel Sidorenko, accused under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization). The state prosecutor asked that he be given a suspended sentence of three years in prison.

[Continue reading...](#)

23.02.2024 - Conservative anti-Putin orthodox group raided in Russia, 40 arrested

Bitter Winter - It was called, as is fashionable in Russia, a "special operation." On February 14, a SWAT police team broke through the windows into a private residence, used as a church, in the village of Aibashi, in the Ulyanovsk Oblast, and arrested some forty persons. The aim of the special operation was to "destroy" a "cult" headed by one Leonid Vlasov, known to his followers as Father Zosima.

But what kind of "cult," exactly? Police footage shows icons very similar to those one may find in a normal Russian Orthodox Church. Yet, Vlasov's group, known as the Russian Orthodox Church of the Tsarist Empire (ROC-CI), has been for years a bête noire of Russian anti-cultists such as Alexander Dvorkin who regard it as an "apocalyptic cult led by an imposter."

[Continue reading...](#)

22.02.2023 - Appeal in Kemerovo upholds suspended sentence for faith for Vladimir Baykalov

JW - On February 21, 2024, **Vladimir Baykalov**'s sentence — six years suspended for talking about the Bible — came into force by decision of the judge of the Kemerovo Regional Court Natalya Vorobyeva. The believer still insists on his innocence of extremism and has the right to appeal this decision to the court of cassation.

During the trial, Vladimir Baykalov stated: "It became obvious that I was convicted not for any extremist actions or statements, but for my peaceful religious beliefs, for faith not prohibited by law, which is expressed in the fact that I pray to God, read, study and apply the Holy Scriptures in my life for the benefit of people and society." In his appeal, Baykalov pointed out that reading sacred texts, participating in joint worship services, and participating in the life of the community are among the ways of expressing faith and cannot be considered a crime in themselves.

[Continue reading...](#)

22.02.2024 - A call for Christian leaders to denounce the Russian Orthodox Church

Religion news - A critical explanation for congressional Republicans' current resistance to providing aid to Ukraine is the belief among the GOP's religious right influencers that Russian President Vladimir Putin is a partner in evangelical Christianity's ongoing support for traditional family values.

Since his invasion of Ukraine, Putin has encouraged that belief by cracking down on abortion access and LGBT rights and even excusing his invasion of Russia's neighbor as a defense against the encroachment of Western liberal culture.

[Continue reading...](#)

21.02.2024 - Dissident Orthodox Bishop arrested for trying to hold memorial service for Navalny

Bitter Winter - The Solovetsky Stone in Saint Petersburg is a monument to the victims of the Soviet repression. Completed in 2002, it consists of a large stone taken from the infamous Solovki Detention Camp on the White Sea's Solovetsky Islands.

Archbishop Grigory Mikhnov-Vaitenko of the Apostolic Orthodox Church announced on social media that on February 17 he will hold at this highly symbolic location a memorial service for the dissident Alexei Navalny, who died on February 16, yet another victim of the brutality of Putin's criminal regime.

[Continue reading...](#)

19.02.2024 - Russia's Christian dissidents

European Conservative - Russian dissident Alexei Navalny must have known he was a dead man when he boarded a flight back to Russia in January 2021. In August 2020, he'd been poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent and medically evacuated to Berlin, where he miraculously survived. Navalny was the most prominent opponent of the Putin regime, an anti-corruption activist and politician who had organized anti-government protests and

boasted millions of YouTube followers. He'd been arrested and jailed on fabricated charges before, and upon returning to Russia was promptly imprisoned again. He went missing in December 2023 for several weeks, reappearing in the brutal "Polar Wolf" penal colony in the Arctic Circle.

[Continue reading...](#)

19.02.2024 - New searches of Jehovah's Witnesses in Vladivostok

JW- On February 14, 2024, at 6 a. m., searches of believers were carried out in Vladivostok. Electronic devices, photographs and personal records were seized, after which they were interrogated in the local department of the Investigative Committee. In one of the cases, during the search, a decision of the Frunzensky Court of Vladivostok dated February 12, 2024 was presented. Since 2017, 27 residents of Vladivostok have faced criminal prosecution for their faith.

16.02.2024 - In the Sverdlovsk region, a case was opened against a preacher for justifying terrorism

Sova - On February 15, 2024, it became known that a criminal case was opened against a preacher from the Sverdlovsk region, **Eduard Charov**, under Part 2 of Art. 205.2 of the Criminal Code (public justification of terrorism committed using the media or electronic or information and telecommunication networks, including the Internet).

The case was initiated due to a comment on VKontakte under a post about an arsonist at the military registration and enlistment office: Charov proposed awarding the arsonist a medal "For Courage."

[Continue reading...](#)

16.02.2024 - A court in Smolensk gave two elderly women a 2-year suspended sentence — they "participated in joint prayers to Jehovah and discussion of Bible interpretations"

JW - **Tatyana Galkevich**, 64, and **Valentina Vladimirova**, 67, Jehovah's Witnesses from Smolensk, received 2 years of suspended sentence with restriction of freedom for a year each for their faith. This decision was made by the Industrialniy District Court of Smolensk on February 14, 2024. The believers deny the guilt of extremism, and the verdict is considered groundless.

"Jehovah's Witnesses, as law-abiding citizens, have stopped using premises for worship, but they cannot stop worshiping God and keeping silent about the beautiful Bible truths," Vladimirova said. Galkevich commented on the process as follows: "The example of Jesus Christ himself helps me ... not to be embittered under the circumstances, when I am unjustifiably persecuted and terribly labeled an extremist."

[Continue reading...](#)

Body of Ukrainian priest found after Russian forces detained him

[Christian Daily](#) (20.02.2024) - The bruised body of a Ukrainian priest who was detained by Russian occupation forces turned up on a village street on Thursday (Feb. 15), with an unconfirmed report of a bullet wound to the head, according to watchdog group Forum 18.

The Rev. Stepan Podolchak, 59, of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, disappeared on Feb. 13 in the Ukrainian village of Kalanchak after Russian occupation forces took him away for questioning in his bare feet with a bag over his head. The priest had chosen to remain with his church after Russians invaded the village in southern Skadovsk District of Kherson Region in early 2022.

Podolchak's battered body was taken to the morgue after a passer-by found it, and a morgue staff member phoned his shocked wife to ask her to identify it. His family buried the priest's body in Kalanchak on Sunday (Feb. 18).

"Today it became known that the occupiers tortured the brightest person I was lucky enough to meet in my life!" noted an official from the Kalanchak village military administration in a Facebook post, now operating from Ukrainian-held territory, as reported by the Kyiv Independent. "Stepan Yaroslavovych Podolchak. Faithful to God, pure in soul, honest and fair! Like an angel who came down to Earth! It is impossible to believe and we will never forgive!"

The Rev. Nikodim Kulygin, bishop of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's Kherson and Tavria Diocese, accused occupation forces of torturing Podolchak to death, according to Forum 18.

Serhy Danilov, a Kyiv-based anthropologist who supports civil society projects in Kherson, told Forum 18 that responsibility for the priest's disappearance lay with the Russian Interior Ministry's Centre for Countering Extremism. He said Podolchak may have faced incarceration in a detention center in the rural settlement of Chaplinka.

Podolchak's body showed bruising and indicated he was handcuffed, Danilov told Forum 18.

"Fr. Stepan was someone who felt he couldn't abandon his people," Danilov reportedly said. "The [Russian] police and FSB repeatedly pressured Fr. Stepan to move to the Moscow Patriarchate. He told them he couldn't betray his oath and community."

Unconfirmed reports claimed a bullet wound in the head caused the priest's death, but the death certificate given to the family stated he died from a heart attack.

Svitlana Fomina, head of the Kalanchak village military administration, believes the priest also suffered torture.

"The Russians tortured him to death," Fomina told the Kyiv-based Centre for Journalistic Investigations. "He was always pro-Ukrainian, conducted all services in Ukrainian, prayed for Ukraine, even under occupation. Apparently, because of this, the Russians took away the most valuable thing that a person has - life."

Forum 18 contacted Russian police in Kalanchak on Monday (Feb. 19) to ask for details of the murder investigation. The unnamed duty officer put the phone down after

responding, "For a long time this [community] hasn't existed here and won't. Forget about it."

An official at the Russian Investigative Committee of Kherson Region also refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the death. "Fill in the form on our website," he said. "We will respond within the required 30 days."

Forum 18 had asked if an investigation has begun, if a criminal case has opened and whether any arrests were made, via the recommended website.

Podolchak led church services in a half-built construction at the Church of All the Holy Lands in Kalanchak after Russian officials banned his church fellowship from using a rented room in Kalanchak's House of Culture following the invasion in Spring 2022.

"Fr. Stepan had built the walls and was trying to complete the building," Danilov informed Forum 18.

The priest and his wife had both children and grandchildren. Originally from Lviv Region in western Ukraine, Podolchak became a priest in 1998 and served the people of Kalanchak for 10 years.

The killing of Podolchak is the latest incident [affecting Christian ministers in the Ukrainian war zone](#). Forum 18 notes that Russian occupiers oppose the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and any religious communities with headquarters in Ukrainian government-held areas.

Podolchak faced ongoing pressure to transfer his priesthood from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church before his death. He refused to comply.

"The [Russian] police and FSB repeatedly pressured Fr. Stepan to move to the Moscow Patriarchate," Danilov said to Forum 18. "He told them he couldn't betray his oath and community."

Russia is obliged to arrest any person suspected of committing torture under its obligations to the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. This includes an obligation to try such suspects under criminal law, making "these offenses punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature."

Forum 18 stated that this requirement is routinely ignored by Russian authorities, including when torture is reported within the country's own internationally recognized borders.

Another report by Forum 18 said that a Greek Catholic priest seized from the city of Berdyansk in Ukraine on Nov. 22 is in Russia after an illegal transfer. The Rev. Ivan Levytsky is held in Rostov Region, according to Evhen Zakharov of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group.

His colleague and fellow priest, The Rev. Bohdan Heleta, is still held in Crimea, occupied by Russia. The priests still face alleged criminal charges concerning weapons and explosives supposedly found by occupation forces. Both men are denied contact with their families.

Navalny, a cumbersome corpse for the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church

Navalny, a convert from atheism to Orthodoxy, remains a source of disarray after his death

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (2002.2024) - The unexpected death of Alexei Navalny at the age of 47 in a Siberian prison plunges the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate into disarray because they do not know what to do with this cumbersome corpse.

The Kremlin's delaying tactics aimed at not showing his body to his loved ones and even not having access to it at all are raising all sorts of suspicions about the real causes of his death.

There is no doubt that the Kremlin does not want to see the grave on Russian soil of a fierce opponent of Putin become a place of pilgrimage for those who disapprove of his policies.

Moreover, the situation is also very embarrassing for Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, who always fully supports Putin even in his war against Ukraine, as Navalny, a former atheist, would certainly have wanted to be buried religiously. No doubt it will also be the wish of his wife and their two children. An Orthodox priest will then have to be brought in to deliver his eulogy and bless him. Very embarrassing.

The next few days or weeks should show us how Putin and Patriarch Kirill will try to fare out of the game.

Navalny was serving a 19-year sentence for alleged extremism and years of criticism of the authoritarian Putin in a harsh penal colony north of the Arctic Circle.

Navalny: an atheist converted to Orthodoxy

In an interview with [Open Democracy](#), he declared:

"I am a believer; I like being a Christian and a member of the Orthodox Church, I like to feel part of something large and universal. I like the fact that there is a distinctive ethos and certain asceticism. But at the same time I am quite happy to live in a predominantly atheist milieu. Up to the age of 25 or so, when I became a father, I was such a rabid atheist that I was ready to grab any priest by the beard."

Navalny, the Russian Orthodox Church and freedom of religion

In the same interview with [Open Democracy](#), he said:

"Orthodoxy is the principal religion of Russia, and we shouldn't fool ourselves by trying to insist on absolute equality. The Russian Orthodox Church's special role is understandable and reasonable.

Over 80% of Russian citizens consider themselves to be Orthodox (even if they do not go to church). Christmas is a public holiday. It is clear that any attempt to pay as much attention to Russia's Buddhists as to Orthodox believers is doomed to failure.

If Buddhists wish it, their religion and priests can have a special role to play in traditionally Buddhist areas such as Kalmykia or Buryatia. And it's fine if Tatarstan and Bashkiria have public holidays linked to Islamic festivals.

We should not, however, deny the obvious fact that the religion of Russia is Orthodox Christianity. This does not, I repeat, imply any discrimination against anyone else. Any limitation on the rights of members of other confessions, or of atheists, should be punishable by law.

The subject of the 'coalescence' of the Patriarchate and the government is a sensitive one. The position of the Orthodox Church on this is that all power comes from God, so they will support whoever is in power. You have to be philosophical about this. (...)

A few days ago I read an intriguing article in the 'Vedomosti' newspaper, on the subject of the peaceful removal of dictators from power. Interestingly, in almost all cases the church acted as main intermediary between the dictator and protesting citizens. Would this be possible here? It's very unlikely.

But I would like to see the Orthodox Church occupying a position in society where the parties in any conflict would seek and accept its mediation."

The European Court brought justice to Navalny

On 6 June 2023, in the case of [Navalnyy v. Russia No 3 \(Application no. 36418/20\)](#) concerning the attempted poisoning of Aleksey Navalny, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights held, unanimously, that there had been a violation of Article 2 (right to life/investigation) – procedural aspect – of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The case concerned the refusal of the Russian authorities to open criminal proceedings into Aleksey Navalny's alleged poisoning in August 2020 which led to his falling into a coma and being put on life support. Forensic examinations carried out in Russia concluded that no potent, poisonous, narcotic or psychotropic substances had been found on samples taken from him or on other items submitted for analysis. After he was flown to Germany for medical treatment, the German Government announced that the results of tests they had carried out revealed definite proof of the presence of a chemical nerve agent from the Novichok group of substances prohibited under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The Court found in particular that the inquiry conducted by the Russian authorities had not been open to scrutiny and had made no allowance for the victim's right to participate in the proceedings.

Furthermore, it had failed to explore the allegations of a possible political motive for the attempted murder, as well as possible involvement of State agents, and had not followed up on the reported use of a substance identified as a chemical weapon prohibited by international and domestic law. As such, the inquiry had not been capable of leading to the establishment of the relevant facts and the identification and, if appropriate, punishment of those responsible. It therefore could not be considered adequate.

On 17 October 2017, in the case [Navalnyy v. Russia \(Applications nos. 29580/12 and 4 others\)](#), the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Navalny's conviction for fraud and money laundering "was based on an unforeseeable application of criminal law and that the proceedings were arbitrary and unfair."

The Court found that the domestic court's decisions had been arbitrary and manifestly unreasonable. ECHR found the Russian courts' decisions violated articles 6 and 7 of the European Convention on Human Rights. On 15 November 2018, the Grand Chamber upheld the decision.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest February 01-15

12.02.2024 - Vilen Avanesov, convicted of believing in Jehovah God, was released after almost five years behind bars

JW- On February 9, 2024, Vilen Avanesov was released from Penal colony No. 3 in Dimitrovgrad, having served his sentence imposed by the court. For talking about God with friends at home, the elderly believer spent 2.5 years in a pre-trial detention center and more than 2 years in a penal colony.

In the penal colony, Vilen served his sentence together with his son Arsen, who will have to spend another year in prison. Both were involved in the sewing industry. For their hard work, they received several rewards. Largely due to Vilen's philanthropy, he developed friendly relations with his cellmates and the administration. "He was respected in the pre-trial detention center, respected in the colony," said Vilen's wife, Stella.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.02.2024 - A case of illegal migration has been opened against a Muslim organization in Moscow.

Sova - On February 12, 2024, a criminal case was opened in Moscow under Part 2 of Art. 322.1 of the Criminal Code (organization of illegal migration committed by an organized group of persons). The case was initiated following a complaint from residents of the Nizhny Novgorod region who were dissatisfied with their proximity to a Muslim organization.

The resolution to initiate a criminal case states that "in the approximate period from 04/01/2022 to 12/23/2023, acting as part of an organized group, unidentified persons from among the employees of MROM "Hafizlyk" and other unidentified persons organized an illegal stay in the Russian Federation under address: Moscow, Basovskaya St., 1, at least 10 foreign citizens, and officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, acting as part of the same organized group, using their official position... did not respond in a timely manner to repeated requests from the residents of the said house... " .

We would like to remind you that, following an inspection based on the complaint, the Investigative Committee refused to initiate a criminal case against the religious organization, but the Chairman of the Investigative Committee, A. Bastrykin, ordered an additional investigation.

12.02.2024 - Jehovah's Witness from Maykop asked to be sentenced to nine years in prison

Sova - **Inver Siyukhov** is accused of organizing the activities of a banned community. On February 9, 2023, in the Maikop City Court of the Republic of Adygea, a debate was held between the parties in the case of Jehovah's Witness Inver Siyukhov, accused under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (organization of the activities of an extremist organization). The state prosecutor asked to sentence him to nine years in prison.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.02.2024 - Archpriest Alexy Uminsky was defrocked for refusing to read the prayer "On Holy Rus'"

Sova - On January 13, 2024, the Moscow Diocesan Court issued a decision in the case of Archpriest Alexy Uminsky. The court was uttered by Fr. Alexy from the priesthood for violating the 25th Rule of the Holy Apostles - violation of the priestly oath.

The reason for this decision was the refusal to read the prayer "On Holy Rus'" prescribed by the patriarch.

The priest did not come to any of the three court hearings; the decision was made in his absence.

On February 8, the decision of the church court was approved by the patriarch.

Let us recall that earlier Moscow priest John Koval was defrocked for a similar "swearing"

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[Continue reading...](#)

12.02.2024 - The Supreme Court of Tatarstan approved the conviction of Sergey Gromov.

JW - On February 9, 2024, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tatarstan rejected the appeal of Jehovah's Witness Sergey Gromov against the sentence and upheld it—6 years and 1 month of imprisonment in a penal colony. The believer can appeal this decision to the court of cassation.

In the appeal, the defendant's lawyer emphasized that such a verdict was unconstitutional: "The court of first instance did not protect Gromov from religious discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses."

Three other Jehovah's Witnesses from Tatarstan were sentenced to various terms in penal colonies, a total of 13 residents of this region are persecuted for their faith.

09.02.2024 - Repression of Falun Gong continues in Russia

Bitter Winter - Falun Gong in Russia is part of the long list of "undesirable" organizations. After the war of aggression against Ukraine was started in 2022, Russian laws were amended and 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. In practice, "undesirable" and "extremist" organizations are now dealt with in a similar way.

[Continue reading...](#)

09.02.2024 - A new wave of searches of Jehovah's Witnesses took place in Birobidzhan.

JW- Not less than ten people were searched as part of a raid on the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Birobidzhan and the village of Amurzet on February 6, 2024. At least two criminal cases have been initiated; one is being investigated by the investigative committee, the other by the FSB.

One of the believers, Anatoly Artamonov, is suspected of involving a local resident in the activities of a liquidated legal entity of Jehovah's Witnesses (Part 1.1 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). From the search warrant it turned out that resident in question is a young man from the village of Amurzet, located 200 km from Birobidzhan.

[Continue reading ...](#)

08.02.2024 - Searches of Jehovah's Witnesses were conducted in the Nizhny Novgorod region

Sova - A case was initiated under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code. On February 7, 2024, it became known that Jehovah's Witnesses were searched in Nizhny Novgorod . Investigative actions were carried out within the framework of a criminal case initiated under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization).

It is reported that about 15 believers are involved in the case. They conducted searches in Gorodets, Shakhunya and Vakhtan (an urban-type settlement within the Shakhunya urban district).

As Jehovah's Witnesses themselves later clarified, the searches took place at at least seven addresses; The security forces generally behaved correctly, but an ambulance was called twice for one elderly believer, and he was eventually hospitalized. It is unclear whether there are suspects or defendants in the case.

06.02.2024 - The third appeal in the Case of Dmitriy Barmakin sentenced him to 8 years for peaceful religious beliefs

JW - On February 6, 2024, another appeal upheld the conviction of Dmitriy Barmakin: 8 years in a penal colony for believing in God. He was taken into custody in the courtroom.

The litigation of the peaceful believer has been going on for more than 4.5 years — since June 2019. During this time, he was acquitted and then convicted again, he spent 550 days behind bars, separated from his wife, who is also on trial for her faith. This was the first incident when the law enforcement began to practice criminal prosecution across family members.

Although the 2017 Supreme Court decision to liquidate legal entities does not prohibit Jehovah's Witnesses from practicing their religion, almost 800 believers have already been prosecuted, and the number of searches has exceeded 2,000.

[Continue reading...](#)

02.02.2024 - In Izhevsk, a case was initiated against the pastor under Art. 239 CC

Sova - On February 2, 2024, it became known that a case was being investigated in Izhevsk under Part 1 of Art. 239 of the Criminal Code (creation of a religious association whose activities involve violence against citizens or other harm to their health, as well as management of such an association). The accused is the leader of a religious organization.

Probably, we are talking about the pastor of the Local religious organization of Christians of the evangelical faith (Pentecostals) "Church "Light of the World"" Sergei Artemyev.

[Continue reading...](#)

A new wave of searches of Jehovah's Witnesses' homes

127 Jehovah's Witnesses are currently serving prison terms in Russia. See documented cases on our website [HERE](#).

HRWF (13.02.2024) – New waves of searches of private homes of Jehovah's Witnesses have been taken place in two regions of Russia at the beginning of February.

Searches in Birobidzhan

Not less than ten people were searched as part of a raid on the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Birobidzhan and the village of Amurzet on 6 February 2024. At least two criminal cases have been initiated; one is being investigated by the investigative committee, the other by the FSB.

One of the believers, Anatoly Artamonov, is suspected of involving a local resident in the activities of a liquidated legal entity of Jehovah's Witnesses (Part 1.1 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). From the search warrant it turned out that the resident in question is a young man from the village of Amurzet, located 200 km from Birobidzhan.

The security forces also came to his family with a search warrant. He had previously applied for alternative civilian service. Although the young man explained this by his personal beliefs based on the Bible, the military commissar indicated that "the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recognized the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses as extremist and banned its activities in Russia in 2017."

Some of those searched in Birobidzhan were talking about the Bible with a local woman and her adult daughter. As it became known, they worked for security forces and secretly recorded conversations with believers.

Searches within the framework of the case being investigated by the Investigative Directorate of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Khabarovsk Territory and the Jewish Autonomous Region were authorized by the Birobidzhan District Court. Law enforcement officers seized electronic devices, data disks, personal records and Bibles in different languages.

The search of the Postnikov family in Birobidzhan took about five hours, at which time a 72-year-old acquaintance came to visit them. The security forces seized her phone. Oleg Postnikov, who is [serving](#) a suspended sentence for his faith, was threatened with tougher punishment, he was told to "prepare a bag." On 9 February, an FSB investigator summoned the spouses for questioning.

In the Jewish Autonomous Region, 23 Jehovah's Witnesses have already been [sentenced](#) to various terms for their Christian beliefs.

Searches in the Nizhny Novgorod Region

On 6 February 2024, at least seven homes of Jehovah's Witnesses and their relatives were searched in the cities of Shakhunya, Gorodets, and the village of Vakhtan (Nizhny Novgorod Region). They affected the elderly and families with children. Some were questioned and later released.

The searches began around 6 am and lasted from two to five hours. They were conducted by security forces from Nizhny Novgorod. They seized electronic devices, personal records, data carriers, and Bibles. In most cases, law enforcement officers behaved correctly. One of the believers, an elderly man, repeatedly lost consciousness during the search, an ambulance was called for him twice and eventually taken to the hospital, from where he was later released home.

The interrogations of believers were led by T. A. Smirnova, senior investigator of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia in the city of Shakhunya.

This is not the first wave of persecution of believers in the Nizhny Novgorod region. [13 Jehovah's Witnesses](#) in the region have already been sentenced for practicing their religion.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest January 16-31

31.01.2024 - Another trial of Muslims meeting to study Nursi's works

Forum 18 - Seven months after a Moscow court handed prison terms to six Muslims who met to study their faith using the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi, the same court is hearing the case of two more. 45-year-old Zurab Dzhabrailov and 53-year-old Dzheykhun Rustamov have so far made two court appearances. The two have been held at Butyrka prison since August 2023. Investigative Committee and FSB security service documents seen by Forum 18 reveal the investigation – which has involved covert surveillance - has been ongoing since 2017.

The prosecution of Muslims who study the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi is continuing in Moscow with the trial of two more men on charges of "organising" and "participating in" the activities of "Nurdzhular", which was banned as extremist in 2008 but which Muslims in Russia deny has ever existed as a formal organisation. Typically, such Muslims meet in homes to study Islam, with one or more expounding on Nursi's works. They also pray, eat, and drink tea together, and do not seek state permission to meet.

[Continue reading...](#)

30.01.2024 - Four Jehovah's Witnesses from Samara were sentenced to seven years in prison

Sova - **Denis Kuzyanin, Sergei Polosenko, Nikolai Vasilyev and Aram Danielyan** were found guilty under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code.

On January 25, 2024, the Samara District Court of Samara sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses Denis Kuzyanin, Sergei Polosenko, Nikolai Vasilyev and Aram Danielyan to seven years in a general regime colony. The believers were found guilty under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization), they were taken into custody in the courtroom.

On the same day, at the debate stage, the state prosecutor asked that the defendants be sentenced to nine years in prison. According to investigators, from December 2020 to December 2021, the defendants in the case held religious services and organized the activities of the Volzhskaya cell, which was part of the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

[Continue reading...](#)

26.01.2024 - Jehovah's Witness from Prokopyevsk sentenced to 2 years 10 months of forced labor

Sova - On January 15, 2024, the Central District Court of Prokopyevsk, Kemerovo Region, sentenced Jehovah's Witness **Pavel Brilkov** to two years and ten months of forced labor. He was found guilty under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization).

On December 18, 2023, during the debate, the prosecution asked that the believer be sentenced to three years of forced labor. Initially, the prosecutor requested three years in prison, but later took into account Brilkov's retirement age and disability and asked for a more lenient sentence.

[Continue reading...](#)

25.01.2024 - A court in Orenburg confirmed the sentence of five Jehovah's Witnesses

Sova- Previously, believers were sentenced to two and a half to three and a half years of suspended imprisonment.

On January 24, 2024, the Orenburg Regional Court confirmed the verdict of five Jehovah's Witnesses under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization).

On August 28, 2023, the Industrial District Court of Orenburg sentenced believers **Sergei Logunov** and **Nikolai Zhugin** to two years and six months of suspended imprisonment with a probationary period of two years and restriction of freedom for eight months. Their co-religionist **Vladimir Kochnev** received a suspended sentence of two years and eight months, a probationary period of two years and two months, and a restriction of freedom for ten months. Jehovah's Witness **Pavel Lekontsev** was sentenced to three years probation with a probationary period of two and a half years and restriction of freedom for 10 months, and the believer **Vladislav Kolbanov** was sentenced to three and a half years of probation with a probationary period of three years and restriction of freedom for ten months.

[Continue reading...](#)

25.01.2024 - Residents of Yekaterinburg protest against a Muslim charity house because they are afraid of anthrax

Sova - On January 22, 2024, it became known that residents of Yekaterinburg opposed the construction of a charitable Muslim house of the Islam Nury organization. Townspeople fear that during construction the cattle burial ground will be damaged and anthrax infection will occur.

The authorities of the Ordzhonikidze district of the city notified residents of the village of Sadovy about the upcoming construction at the end of 2023. It is assumed that a two-story building will be erected on Verstovaya Street, which will house an event hall for 40 people, a library, educational and administrative premises.

[Continue reading...](#)

25.01.2024 - The first sentence for faith in the Samara region.

JW - On January 25, 2024, Judge Tatyana Begunova of the Central District Court of Tolyatti found **Sona Olopova** guilty of extremism because of her religion and sentenced her to 2 years of forced labor. She will serve her sentence in a correctional center. The believer considers the sentence unfair.

"The evidence presented by the prosecution does not confirm my guilt in committing a crime. All arguments boil down to the fact that . . . in the city of Tolyatti, a small group of people professing the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses held worship services, which began with song and prayer and were aimed at discussing the Bible," Sona said in court.

[Continue reading...](#)

24.01.2024 - A Court in Cherkessk reviewed Yelena Menchikova's case and found her guilty of extremism again for talking about the Bible

JW- **Yelena Menchikova**, 59, was found guilty again - on January 23, 2024, the judge of the Cherkessk City Court, Nauruz Shukurov, sentenced the woman with a disability to four and a half years suspended with a probation period of two and a half years because of her religion.

As Yelena noted, speaking in court, the charges boil down to the fact that she invited friends "to study the Holy Scriptures (Bible), consisting of collective singing of songs, prayers, and the study of religious articles." "I never imagined that hospitality in the Caucasus would turn out to be such a grave crime and that punishment would follow," the believer said. At the same time, the indictment does not contain a specific description of what manifestations of extremism, when and under what circumstances Menchikova allowed.

[Continue reading ...](#)

22.01.2024 - In the Altai Territory, an investigation is underway into the activities of a group of adherents of the Alla-Ayat teachings.

Sova - It is reported that searches were carried out in a criminal case regarding the organization of the activities of an extremist organization.

On January 18, 2024, it became known that in the Altai Territory, as part of a criminal investigation, searches were carried out at the premises of alleged adherents of the Alla-Ayat teaching. As the regional FSB department reported on January 22, the case was opened under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization).

[Continue reading...](#)

19.01.2024 - Four residents of Krasnodar were fined for collaborating with undesirable Falun Gong organizations

Sova - On January 18, 2024, it became known that the Prikubansky District Court of Krasnodar fined four local residents 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 has been made to recognize its activities as undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation).

The court found that the defendants took part in the activities of the association "Falun Dafa Cultivation Center", which implements projects and programs and distributes materials of the Buddhist community "Springs of the Dragon", the European Association of "Falun Dafa", "Friends of Falun Gong", and the World Rescue Council persecuted Falun Gong adherents, whose activities are recognized as undesirable in Russia.

The court fined each of the four defendants five thousand rubles. All four admitted their guilt.

[Continue reading...](#)

18.01.2024 - The imam-khatib of the mosque in the village of Toothpick Second was fined for possessing an Islamic book.

SOVA - Akhmat Abuzyarov was found guilty under Art. 20.29 Code of Administrative Offences. On January 15, 2024, the Perevolotsky District Court of the Orenburg Region fined two thousand rubles under Art. 20.29 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (storage of extremist materials for the purpose of mass distribution) of Akhmat Abuzyarov, imam-khatib of the mosque in the village of Toothpick Second, and confiscated the printed material confiscated from him.

[Continue reading...](#)

17.01.2024 - Court sentenced Nikolay Saparov, one of Jehovah's Witness from Adygea, to 6 years in prison

JW - On January 17, 2024, the judge of the Maykop City Court of the Republic of Adygea, Zaurbiy Birzhev, found **Nikolay Saparov** guilty of extremism and sentenced him to 6 years in a general regime colony with restriction of liberty for 1 year.

The believer does not agree with the verdict and is ready to appeal it to higher authorities. The prosecutor requested 7.5 years in a general regime colony for him.

In March 2022, Nikolay Saparov was detained at the airport in Mineralnye Vody, where he was waiting for departure with his wife and minor daughter. He was taken about 300 km away to the law enforcement department in Adygea for interrogation. As Nikolay stated during one of the court hearings, the security forces beat him along the way, and, using an electric shocker, forced him to take the blame for extremism. According to investigators, Saparov committed "actions of an organizational nature ... expressed in meetings using the Internet ... coordination of talks and religious services at these meetings."

[Continue reading...](#)

16.01.2024 - The verdict of a Jehovah's Witness from Novokuznetsk has been confirmed

Sova - **Tatyana Sushilnikova** was sentenced to four years of suspended imprisonment under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code.

On January 16, 2024, the Kemerovo Regional Court confirmed the verdict of Jehovah's Witness Tatyana Sushilnikova, whom the Kuznetsk District Court of Novokuznetsk on November 15, 2023 found guilty under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization), giving her a sentence of four years of suspended imprisonment with a three-year probationary period, as well as an additional punishment of 10 months of restriction of freedom.

[Continue reading...](#)

EU sanctions against a military training company created by a high-level Orthodox cleric

An EU's pinprick in the Russian military-Orthodox complex. Patriarch Kirill and the whole Russian Orthodox Church should be under EU sanctions, according to Human Rights Without Frontiers.

By Dr Evgeniia Gidulianova with Willy Fautré



Photo <https://manas.news/>

HRWF (29.01.2024) – A military institution called “Andrew’s Cross” which was created by a high-level cleric of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) for training volunteers has come under the last package of EU sanctions. (*)

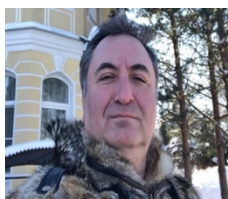
On 18 December 2023, the Council of the European Union imposed restrictive measures on the [SPAS TV Channel of the Russian Orthodox Church](#) and [Tsargrad](#) TV Channel (Царьград ТВ) belonging to and financed by the so-called Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev. They were included in the [12th Package of Sanctions](#) targeting an additional group of [61 individuals and 86 entities in Russia](#) responsible for actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine.

"Bloknot" was the first Russian media outlet to [report](#) on 10 November 2022 on the creation of the Andrew's Cross in St. Petersburg under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church. The publication pointed out that the founders of the Andrew's Cross were representatives of the community of the Kronstadt Naval St. Nicholas Cathedral. The Andrew's Cross, in turn, is depicted on the flag of the Russian Navy.

Who is behind the Orthodox "Andrew's Cross"?

[The founders and main public figures](#) of the Andrew's Cross are Russian billionaire **Vladimir Khilchenko** and the rector of the Kronstadt Naval Cathedral, **Archimandrite Alexy**. The activities of the organization are supervised by a military man and former policeman, **Sergei Nosov**.

Billionaire Volodymyr Khilchenko is the coordinating director **of the Andrew's Cross**, which was created as a military training center against the backdrop of the announcement of "a partial mobilization" in autumn 2022 with the blessing of the Rector of the Kronstadt Naval Cathedral, Father Alexy (Alexander Ganzhin) for volunteers wanting to go to war.



Vladimir Khilchenko, 2018. Photo: [Facebook](#)

[Archimandrite Alexy](#) (secular name Alexander Ganzhin) is a clergyman of the Russian Orthodox Church. He was born in 1960 in the Perm oblast. In 1979-1981 he served in the Soviet Army and in 1982-1989 in the bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Main Department of Internal Affairs of the Leningrad City Executive Committee. In 1989, he became a priest of the [St. Petersburg Diocese](#).

He is the rector of the St. Nicholas Naval Cathedral (Kronstadt) and cumulates several high level positions in institutions of the Orthodox Church in connection with the army: deputy chairman of the Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies, chairman of the Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies, dean of the Military Deanery District Diocese of St. Petersburg of the Moscow Patriarchate, etc.



Archimandrite Alexy. Photo: [Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate](#)

Sergei Nosov is a military and former policeman. He was previously known as the chairman of the St. Petersburg branch of the All-Russian Trade Union of Military Personnel (OPSV). He used to work in the criminal investigation department but was caught taking a bribe and was sentenced to one year in prison. He is now also the curator of the Andrew's Cross.



Sergei Nosov, 2020. Photo: Trade [Union of Military Personnel of St. Petersburg and Leningrad Region](#)

What is the St. Andrew's Cross?

Archimandrite Alexy (Alexander Ganjin) said in his interview with [Fontanka](#) that Andrew's Cross is not a private military company but it is a centre for basic military training of people wanting to volunteer for the Special Military Operation. A month-long preparation for everyone. They apply at the military registration and enlistment office and go as volunteers in their own specialty, with his blessing. "Several million dollars worth of aid were sent directly to the district headquarters," says Archimandrite Alexy. The site for military training is located in the Church of St. Spyridon of Trimythous (St. Petersburg), he said.

Vladimir Khilchenko's account in an interview with the [Russian Institute of Religion and Politics](#) differs somewhat from the story of Archimandrite Alexy. He calls the "Andrew's Cross" a center of tactical training. Former special forces soldiers take part in the project, he said. The concept of the organization is to survive in the difficult conditions of warfare and to prepare people for volunteer units, **as well as for participation in various Private Military Companies.** Theoretical classes are held at the Kirov Palace of Culture on Vasilievsky Island [in St. Petersburg] and unlike what Archimandrite Alexy said, the place of practical training is Kronstadt, where there's a shooting range, Khilchenko said. The training is financed both by private donations and with the personal money of the participants.

Sergei Nosov gave similar information to Khilchenko in his interview with [Bumaga Publishing House](#), adding that it was thanks to the help of the rector of the Naval Cathedral, Father Alexy [Archimandrite Alexy], that a platform for practical training was found in Kronstadt, on the territory of a former military unit. The training consists of theoretical and practical exercises, such as simulating real combat operations, fighting in urban areas, shooting or mining buildings.

The Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill and the army

On 16 July 1995, [the Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies](#), of which Archimandrite Alexy (Alexander Ganzhin) is the vice-chairman, was established by the decision of the Holy Synod. Previously, the interaction with law enforcement agencies was carried out by [the Department of External Church Relations](#). The first chairman of the newly formed Department was [Bishop Savva of Krasnogorsk](#).

The Russian Orthodox Church has a military clergy whose [statute](#) was adopted at a session of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church on 25-26 December 2013. Military priests in Russia have nothing to do with the Western concept of chaplains as it is said in their regulations: "Recognizing war as evil, the Church blesses its children to participate in hostilities when it comes to protecting their neighbors and their Fatherland. The Church has always respected the soldiers who did their duty at the cost of their own lives and health."

This shows to what extent the Russian Orthodox Church is integrated in the army as an active instrument of the Kremlin.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow (Vladimir Gundayev), has been preaching the doctrine of the "Russian World" and publicly blessing the actions of the Russian army and the Kremlin. He has repeatedly denied war crimes by the Russian army and was also one of the first to support Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. For Patriarch Kirill, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine is a "holy war." He is an instrument of Russian propaganda and provides financial support for the occupation of Ukraine.

In 2022, personal sanctions against Patriarch Kirill were adopted by Ukraine, Great Britain, and Canada. The EU tried to put him under sanctions but failed because President of Hungary Viktor Orbán vetoed the imposition of EU sanctions on him, a consensus being the rule for such a measure.

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.*"

The Security Service of Ukraine is conducting [a criminal investigation](#) against Patriarch Kirill. According to the investigation, he is a member of the inner circle of the top military and political leadership of Russia. To disseminate propaganda, he massively uses the religious communities of the Russian Orthodox Church under his control on the territory of the Russian Federation, as well as representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church/Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP).

Since the beginning of the full-scale military invasion, Ukraine has adopted several packages of sanctions against Russian priests.

On 23 January 2023, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky put [sanctions on 22 figures of the Russian Orthodox Church](#), "who, under the guise of spirituality, support terror and genocidal policies."

Archimandrite Alexy (Alexander Ganzhin), deputy chairman of the Synodal Department of the Russian Orthodox Church for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies and one of the founders of the "Andrew's Cross", was also included in this sanctions list.

Conclusion

This EU sanction is just a pinprick in the military-Orthodox complex of Russia as Andrew's Cross and Orthodox Archimandrite Alexy are just piny pieces of the Kreml's war machine. Patriarch Kirill and the whole Russian Orthodox Church should be under EU sanctions.

() Footnote: The EU calls the "Andrew's Cross" a private military company (PMC) but it could not be described as a military company as it is rather a military training institution for volunteers who will sign afterwards a contract with the Ministry of Defence and be dispatched to military units. It cannot really be said to be private as it officially works both with the Orthodox Church and the Russian Army.*



The center "Andrew's Cross" was organized with the blessing of Archimandrite Alexy, one of its founders.

Russian Orthodox Church Conference "The war on Ukraine is a Sacred War"

The Russian Orthodox Church stressed that thanks to their work with the "Special Military Operation" soldiers in the "trenches" no longer shy away from Christian symbols.

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (29.01.2024) - **The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), together with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation**, has recently held a conference titled "**Sacred War: Transformation of Russia**", dedicated to Russia's war on Ukraine, reports [the Telegram channel of the Military Department of the Moscow Patriarchate](#).

"The forum brought together participants from all regions of Russia, including different generations of defenders of the Motherland, from veterans of the Great Patriotic War to participants in the Special Military Operation.

The event, which took place on 25 January at the Central House of the Russian Army, was led by Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol. He said in his speech that "The Church has always been, is and will be with its people, with its army. To date, **707 priests of the Russian Orthodox Church have made out more than 2,000 trips to the zone of the Special Military Operation.**"

While chaplains in democratic countries provide spiritual and psychological assistance to soldiers and conscripts, the Russian priests on the front have nothing to do with chaplaincy. The objective of their presence is to support troop morale so that Russia can win its Holy War against Ukraine

According to Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol, Chairman of the Synodal Department, soldiers "reveal their best qualities" after communicating with clerics and some in the trenches even "no longer shy away from Christian symbols" Holy War obliges.

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu sent a greeting to the conference participants, saying that in Ukraine Russian soldiers are standing "on guard of our Fatherland" and "courageously fulfilling their military duty".

"God will save the world through Putin"

According to Archbishop Pitirim of Syktyvkar Eparchy, God will save the world through Putin as he said in a [video](#):

THERE IS NO BETTER PRESIDENT

God saved my dear homeland,
When the hour of the country burned out,
Borisov's wormhole,
The wolves' surroundings were removed.

And there was no better than Vladimir,
Another would sell Russia.
He tramples the dragon confidently
And the aspids are beating.

Through Vladimir Putin
Our Savior will save the whole world.
Holy Russia would have been destroyed,
But it won't fall with the Chosen One.

Archbishop Pitirim is under Ukrainian sanctions for propaganda and support for the war against Ukraine.

Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest January 01-15

16.01.2024 - Criminal case for repeat "discreditation"

Forum 18 - Investigators are working on a criminal case against 86-year-old independent Orthodox Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov for repeat "discreditation" of the Armed Forces. If convicted, he could be imprisoned for five years. He condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the conduct of the war as "Satanic". The Federal Investigative Committee and Krasnodar Region branches of the Interior Ministry and Federal Security Service did not answer questions on the case. Armed personnel raided his church in October 2023, torturing a fellow priest. The community is "very intimidated", with parishioners "afraid to attend services".

[Continue reading...](#)

13.01.2024 - Russian Orthodox priest faces expulsion for refusing to pray for war victory

Reuters - A prominent liberal priest faces expulsion from the Russian Orthodox Church for refusing to read out a prayer asking God to guide Russia to victory over Ukraine.

In a verdict published on Saturday, a church court said Aleksiy Uminsky should be "expelled from holy orders" for violating his priestly oath. The decision was forwarded for approval to Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian church who strongly backs President Vladimir Putin.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.01.2024 - The second appeal overturned the sentence of Andrey Sazonov, one of Jehovah's Witnesses from Uray. The case is sent back for the third retrial

JW - On January 11, 2024, the Judicial Collegium of the Court of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area -- Yugra, chaired by Judge Lyudmila Blashkova, overturned the verdict against Andrey Sazonov and sent the case for a new trial to the Uray City Court with a new panel of judges.

In the winter of 2021, the Uray City Court found Andrey Sazonov guilty of organizing the activities of an extremist organization and its financing and sentenced him to a fine of 450,000 rubles. The court considered Sazonov's peaceful religious activities, as well as participation in fundraising to help his fellow believers, to be a crime. The verdict was appealed. The appellate instance overturned the verdict, sending the case for a new trial.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.01.2024 - Russia: TV Channel of an Orthodox Oligarch under EU sanctions

Bitter Winter - Konstantin Malofeev's Tsargrad TV spread Russian disinformation and the anti-cult hate speech of the notorious Alexander Dvorkin.

On 18 December 2023, the Council of the European Union imposed restrictive measures on Tsargrad TV Channel belonging to and financed by the so-called "Orthodox oligarch" Konstantin Malofeev, as part of the 12th Package of Sanctions targeting an additional group of 61 individuals and 86 entities in Russia responsible for actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine. On that occasion, the SPAS TV Channel of the Russian Orthodox Church was also put under EU sanctions.

Tsargrad TV Channel was created in 2015. In the fall of 2017, Malofeev created the "Two-Headed Eagle," which he defined as the "society for the development of Russian Historical Enlightenment." From the end of 2017, it stopped broadcasting and completely switched online.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.01.2024 - The court rejected Navalny's complaint about the impossibility of having religious literature in his cell

Sova - The Supreme Court rejected two of Navalny's claims on several points of internal regulations in the colonies. One of the lawsuits concerned restrictions on the number of books, including religious ones.

On January 11, 2024, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation considered two claims of Alexei Navalny against the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.

The plaintiff demanded that several points of the internal regulations in the colonies be invalidated. The first claim concerned the ban on having more than one book, including religious ones, in punishment cells, PKT and EPKT.

Previously serving a sentence in a colony, Navalny complained that he was not allowed to have the New Testament and Psalter in his cell.

The second lawsuit related to the 15-minute meal limit. The court rejected both claims.

12.01.2024 - The leader of Falun Gong in Irkutsk was fined under the article on "undesirable" organization

ovd - The Kirovsky District Court of Irkutsk fined the leader of the local Falun Gong association, Nadezhda Lai, 12 thousand rubles under the article on participation in the activities of an "undesirable" organization (Article 20.33 of the Administrative Code). A friend of hers told OVD-Info about this.

According to the security forces, Lai, a week before the picket she is charged with, which took place on October 29, agreed on the contents of the posters by telephone with one of the witnesses in the case. At the same time, her acquaintance noted, the details of the woman's calls refuted the fact that she allegedly communicated with this man.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.01.2024 - "I was found guilty only for being one of Jehovah's Witnesses." The appeal instance confirmed the suspended sentence for Valeriy Vyaznikov

JW - On January 11, 2023, the Primorye Territory Court upheld the conviction of Valeriy Vyaznikov, a 60-year-old resident of Luchegorsk, to 2.5 years suspended for participating in the "activities of a banned organization." The believer considers this decision unjust.

The court considered the fact that Vyaznikov is one of Jehovah's Witnesses to be evidence of extremism. The defendant noted: "I was convicted only for peacefully practicing my religion, which was reflected in the fact that I once talked about my beliefs and the teachings of the Bible with a young man who turned out to be a law enforcement officer."

[Continue reading...](#)

09.01.2024 - Data on those who attended Christmas services in 2024

SOVA - On January 7, 2024, the Russian Orthodox Church celebrated Christmas. We provide statistical data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Rosgvardia on attending festive services in different regions.

In total, according to the official representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Irina Volk, festive divine services were held in 10.5 thousand churches and monasteries in six thousand settlements. More than 1.4 million people took part in them.

[Continue reading...](#)

08.01.2024 - Russian guard raids on Muslim facilities undermining patriotism of believers – OpEd

Eurasia review - Muslim leaders in the Russian Federation have long been alarmed by the propensity of many Russian officials and ordinary Russians as well to lump together Muslims who are Russian citizens and Muslim immigrants, something these leaders have long insisted is not only wrong but counterproductive.

Now, Mufti Ravil-Khazrat Pancheyev, the head of the Muslim Spiritual Directorate (MSD) of St. Petersburg and North-West Russia, has taken the unusual step of complaining about this to the head of the Russian National Guard and warning just how dangerous its actions in this regard are.

[Continue reading...](#)

04.01.2024 - In Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses are the most persecuted religion, with 127 prisoners as of January 1, 2024

European Times - As of January 1, 2024, 127 Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison in Russia for practising their faith in private homes, according to the last update of the database of religious prisoners of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

[Continue reading...](#)

TV Channel of an Orthodox Oligarch Under EU Sanctions

Konstantin Malofeev's Tsargrad TV spread Russian disinformation and the anti-cult hate speech of the notorious Alexander Dvorkin.

BY DR. [IEVGENIIA GIDULIANOVA](#) WITH WILLY FAUTRÉ

[Bitter Winter](#) (12.01.2024) - On 18 December 2023, the Council of the European Union imposed restrictive measures on Tsargrad TV Channel (Царьград ТВ) belonging to and financed by the so-called "Orthodox oligarch" Konstantin Malofeev, as part of the [12th Package of Sanctions](#) targeting an additional group of [61 individuals and 86 entities in Russia](#) responsible for actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine. On that occasion, the [SPAS TV Channel of the Russian Orthodox Church](#) was also put under EU sanctions.

Tsargrad TV Channel was created in 2015. In the fall of 2017, Malofeev created the "Two-Headed Eagle," which he defined as the "society for the development of Russian Historical Enlightenment." From the end of 2017, it stopped broadcasting and completely switched online.

In 2020, Tsargrad TV was [blocked](#) on You Tube due to violation of sanctions legislation and trade rules, as reported by [Ukrainska Pravda](#). Before that ban, Tsargrad TV had 1.06 million subscribers.

Tsargrad TV positions itself as a conservative information and analytical TV channel that covers events in Russia and the world from the point of view of the Russian Orthodox majority in the spheres of Russia's domestic and foreign policy, geopolitics, international relations, culture, traditions, and religion. Among its aims, the promotion of monarchism and the history of pre-revolutionary Orthodox Russia.

Malofeev's "Society for the Promotion of Russia's Historical Development" is suspected by the United States of involvement in espionage in favor of Russia. The organization, among other things, advocates "the return of the Russian Empire to its historical borders."

Tsargrad TV channel also became known for its harsh, and sometimes insulting, statements against other religions in the Russian Federation, in unison with the state policy of restricting the freedoms of non-Orthodox religions and their members.

Alexander Dvorkin's hate speech against Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientology on Tsargrad TV

Commenting on the decision of the Supreme Court liquidating and banning the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia in 2017, [Tsargrad TV wrote](#) on 19 July 2017: "The Russian state has finally realized that it is not only the suicide attacks that pose a danger to it, but also the prayer meetings of cults... The Jehovah's Witnesses' cult in Russia was finally and irrevocably banned... From now on, stunted adherents of the heretical doctrine will no longer cling in pairs to passers-by or knock on the doors of apartments in multi-story buildings, asking the stunned Philistines whether they know about God"

With regard to the Church of Scientology also liquidated by a court and banned in Russia, Tsargrad TV Channel [calls it](#) a totalitarian cult. On 7 June 2017, one day after a wide-scale police crackdown on the Church of Scientology in St Petersburg, Tsargrad widely opened its microphone and its columns to the Alexander Dvorkin, a member of the board of directors of the international anti-cult organization FECRIS and its former vice-president for many years, well-known for fueling hostility and hatred towards religious minorities, especially of foreign origin.

Dvorkin was then quoted as saying: "*Once, Time Magazine published a large collection of materials on Scientology, under the general title: 'Scientology is a cult of greed and power.' You can't say it better!*"

According to Dvorkin, Scientology is a totalitarian cult and a threat to state security as it is also an international intelligence service that collects information about everyone: "*Especially purposefully, Scientologists collect information about politicians, show business figures, security forces and, of course, about the enemies of the cult against whom it fights with the most dishonest, dirty and often criminal methods. And they purposefully collect compromising information. And all the information collected about each member of the cult, all his relatives and loved ones, everyone they mention, remains in the local Scientology organization and is also sent to the Scientology headquarters in Los Angeles. All basic procedures of Scientology, during which information is extracted from a person—the so-called auditing—are recorded under audio and video, often without the knowledge of the person himself. In addition, since 1993, Scientology enjoyed the special patronage of the U.S. Department of State. It is quite reasonable to assume that the support agreement that was concluded that year includes the consent of Scientologists to provide part of the collected information to the intelligence community of the United States.*"

These statements on Tsargrad regarding the Church of Scientology and Jehovah's Witnesses were completely consonant with the Kremlin's policy and coincided with the time when the FSB officers searched the central office of the Church of Scientology in Russia and inspected the Church of Scientology of St. Petersburg.

Sanctions against Tsargrad TV and Malofeev by the US, Australia, Canada, the EU, Japan, New Zealand, the UK and Ukraine

The reason for the inclusion of the TV channel in the sanctions list of the European Union on 18 December 2023 was the dissemination of pro-Kremlin propaganda, justification of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, and funding by the Russian government.

The Religious Information Service of Ukraine ([RISU](#)) also emphasizes that the sanctions were imposed for the fact that Tsargrad spreads disinformation and Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine, supports nationalist narratives, justifies the occupation of Ukrainian territories and the removal of Ukrainian children to Russia, including their further adoption. As noted, the TV channel also financially supports the aggression.

According to the Telegram channel [Christians Against War](#), Konstantin Malofeev helped pro-Russian separatists foment the war in the Donbas. While all of Malofeev's initiatives in Ukraine were, formally, privately organized and funded, intercepted phone calls between him and his lieutenants on the ground in Ukraine, as well as hacked email correspondence, showed that he closely coordinated his actions with the Kremlin, at times via the powerful Orthodox Bishop Tikhon whom Malofeev and Putin (in their own words) share as "spiritual adviser."



Konstantin Malofeev himself has been under US sanctions since the end of 2014 in connection with the events in Eastern Ukraine. He is also on the sanctions list of Canada.

On 20 April 2022, the United States introduced a new package of sanctions against Russia, which included 29 individuals and 40 legal entities, including the Tsargrad TV channel. This was reported by the [US Treasury](#). In its [press release](#), the US Treasury was saying "Russia-based company Tsargrad OOO (Tsargrad) is a cornerstone of Malofeyev's [sic] broad malign influence network. Tsargrad spreads pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation that is amplified by the GoR. Tsargrad served as an intermediary organization between pro-Russian European politicians and GoR officials, and recently pledged to donate more than \$10 million to support Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine."

US authorities also accused Konstantin Malofeev of trying to circumvent sanctions, as it was [stated by](#) US Attorney General Merrick Garland at a press conference on 6 April 2022. Garland said the US Department of Justice confiscated "millions of dollars" from an account related to Malofeev. According to the U.S. Attorney General, Malofeev created a scheme that allowed media outlets controlled by the businessman to operate in Europe. The founder of Tsargrad is also suspected of financing Russians who contributed to the separation of Crimea from Ukraine and its annexation by Russia.

On 2 September 2022, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine adopted sanctions against the Russian propaganda Tsargrad Group of companies. This was [reported by](#) the press service of the Ministry of Reintegration of Ukraine.

In February 2023, President Joe Biden's administration seized Konstantin Malofeev's assets.

On 4 February 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Canada announced the imposition of new sanctions against Russia, under which the Russian TV channel Tsargrad fell for spreading disinformation and propaganda.

On 23 June 2023, the European Union approved the 11th package of sanctions against Russia. Among the sanctions aimed at stopping the systematic international campaign of the Russian Federation to manipulate the media, aimed at increasing the destabilization of neighboring countries [licenses have been suspended](#) for broadcasting five media resources, including the Russian TV channel Tsargrad.

The EU pointed out that these media outlets are under constant direct or indirect control of the Russian leadership and have been used for constant propaganda aimed at political parties, especially during elections, civil society in the EU and neighboring countries, asylum seekers, Russian ethnic minorities, gender minorities and the functioning of the EU's democratic institutions.

However, according to the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the restrictions imposed by the 11th package of sanctions did not prevent the Tsargrad TV channel and its employees from carrying out activities in the EU, except for broadcasting, such as research and interviews.

The 12th package of sanctions strengthened the restrictions imposed earlier. The assets of sanctioned persons are frozen, and EU citizens and companies are prohibited from providing them with funds.

As the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell on the new restrictions against the Russian Federation: "In this 12th package, we propose a powerful set of new lists and economic measures that will further weaken the Russian war machine. Our message is clear, as I stated when I chaired the informal Foreign Affairs Council in Kyiv: we remain steadfast in our commitment to Ukraine and will support its struggle for freedom and sovereignty."

In addition to the US, the EU and Ukraine, other countries—Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (UK)—imposed sanctions on Tsargrad TV channel and its owner, the Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev.

Jehovah's Witnesses are the most persecuted religion: 127 prisoners as of 1 January 2024

By Willy Fautré

[European Times](#) (04.01.2024) - As of 1 January 2023, 127 Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison in Russia for practising their faith in private homes, according to the last update of the [database of religious prisoners of Human Rights Without Frontiers](#).

Some statistics since the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017

- More than 790 Jehovah's Witnesses from 19 to 85 years have been criminally charged or have been under investigation for the practice of their faith; among them, 205 were over 60 years old (more than 25%)
- Over 2000 homes have been raided by the FSB and local police
- 521 believers have appeared on the national extremist/terrorist watch list ([Rosfinmonitoring](#)), 72 of them being included in this list during the sole year of 2023.

Some statistics in 2023

- 183 homes were raided
- 43 men and women were detained, including 15 sent to pretrial detention centers
- 147 men and women were criminally charged and sentenced
- 47 were sentenced to prison
- 33 were sentenced for 6 years or more

Last sentences in 2023: from 6 1/2 to 7 ½ years in prison

On 22 December 2023, the judge of the Cheremushkinsky District Court respectively sentenced Aleksandr Rumyantsev, Sean Pike and Eduard Sviridov to 7.5 years, 7 years and 6.5 years for singing religious songs and prayers.

At the end of the summer of 2021, [a series of searches](#) took place in the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow, as a result of which three of them ended up in a pre-trial detention center. The criminal case was investigated during 15 months. Then it was considered in court for 13 months. As a result, by the time of the verdict, they had already spent 2 years and 4 months in a pre-trial detention center.

They all denied the accusation of extremism.

A report by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance [expressed](#) concern that "anti-extremist legislation [of the Russian Federation] is being used against certain religious minorities, in particular against Jehovah's Witnesses."

European Court of Human Rights

On 31 January 2023, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) considered [seven complaints by Jehovah's Witnesses](#) from Russia related to incidents having occurred from 2010 to 2014, before the ban.

In all of them, the court sided with the Witnesses and ordered them to pay compensation in the amount of 345,773 euros and another 5,000 euros as legal costs. This was the second decision of the ECHR in the last two years in favor of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

In June 2022, the ECHR declared that it was [unlawful for Russia to ban Jehovah's Witnesses](#) in 2017. The total amount of compensation under this decision exceeds 63 million euros.

So far, the decisions of the ECHR have had no impact on the practice of the Russian law enforcement system. The Russian authorities have not paid compensation to acquitted believers, and continue to sentence them to long prison terms.
