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## **Two Ukrainian priests released by Russia after 19 months of detention**

See their cases in [\*\*HRWF Database\*\*](#)

By [Anugrah Kumar](#)

[Christian Post](#) (03.07.2024) - Two Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church priests, Redemptorist Fathers Ivan Levytsky and Bohdan Geleta, have been released from Russian captivity after more than 19 months through a prisoner exchange facilitated by diplomatic efforts involving the Vatican.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church [announced](#) that Levytsky and Geleta, hieromonks of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, were released last Friday after initially being arrested on Nov. 26, 2022, in the occupied city of Berdiansk.

In a recent interview with Ukrinform, a church leader said that the church received "alarming signals" that the priests were being "tortured regularly."

"His Beatitude Sviatoslav expressed his deep gratitude to the Apostolic See for the rescue of the UGCC priests," the announcement reads. "He conveyed special thanks to Pope Francis, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, and the entire Vatican diplomatic corps. Special gratitude for mediation was expressed to Cardinal Matteo Zuppi and Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas, Apostolic Nuncio to Ukraine. Each of them contributed invaluable to making this event a reality."

Pope Francis publicly expressed his thanksgiving after the priests' release, according to [National Catholic Reporter](#).

"I give thanks to God for the freeing of the two Greek Catholic priests," the pope said after the Angelus prayer on Saturday, calling for prayers for all prisoners of war.

Supporters say the priests were arrested after military items were falsely placed in their church, leading to charges of "illegal possession of weapons."

When the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, Levytsky and Geleta chose to stay in the occupied territories and served both Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic

communities as a "beacon of hope for people under occupation," the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church contends.

"They were arrested, followed by some military items being planted in the church and accused of illegal possession of weapons," the statement continued. "There were reports that they were being tortured mercilessly to extract a confession to a crime they did not commit."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in a social media [post on X](#), announced the release of Levytsky and Geleta among 10 prisoners returned to Ukrainian authorities. President Zelenskyy acknowledged the Vatican's pivotal role in securing their release, conveying gratitude towards the Holy See.

Dmytro Lubinets, the Ukrainian Ombudsman, told the [Interfax](#) news agency that this is the first instance of the Vatican's direct involvement in the repatriation of Ukrainian adults, indicating a new potential channel for further civilian returns. He claims that Russia is illegally detaining over 14,000 Ukrainian citizens.

Numerous cases of detainment and torture of Ukrainian clergy have been reported from occupied Ukrainian territories.

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 the southern Skadovsk District of the Kherson Region in early 2022. His battered body was found on a village street by a passer-by, and taken to the morgue.

Lubinets [said](#) at the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, D.C. in February that Russian soldiers and occupation officials had committed at least 76 acts of religious persecution in Ukraine since the invasion of February 2022 as part of an attempt to destroy national identity. Additionally, he alleged that Russian forces had killed or captured at least 29 clerics or religious leaders in Ukraine since the war began.

Since the invasion, he said Evangelical Christians, including Baptists, Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists, had suffered greatly.

"The Russian military has repeatedly threatened the total physical elimination of all Evangelical believers, calling them American spies, sectarians and enemies of the Russian Orthodox people," Lubinets said. "To kill a person, to demolish a church, the Russians do everything to destroy us as a nation."

### **More reading**

[Russian forces release two Ukrainian Catholic priests captured in 2022](#)

[Pope praises release of two Ukrainian priests from Russian captivity](#)

[Ukrainian Catholic priests freed in Vatican-mediated exchange](#)

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## Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest June 16-30

### **29.06.2024 - Dagestani Jews look to rebuild after extremist attacks in the restive region of southern Russia**

Apnews - Jews in the predominantly Muslim region of Dagestan in southern Russia say they are determined to regroup and rebuild following a deadly attack by Islamic militants on Christian and Jewish houses of worship in two cities last weekend.

The attacks in the regional capital of Makhachkala and the city of Derbent on Sunday killed 21 people — most of them police officers — and injured at least 43 others in the restive region in the North Caucasus on the Caspian Sea.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **27.06.2024 - Three Jehovah's Witnesses from Novocherkassk sentenced to up to six and a half years in a penal colony for their beliefs**

JW - On June 26, 2024, Nikolay Egorov, judge of the Novocherkassk City Court of the Rostov Region, sentenced Lubov Galitsina to 2 years and 3 months, Gevorg Yeritsyan to 6 years and 2 months, and Garegin Khachaturyan to 6.5 years in a penal colony. The court considered the term assigned to Galitsina to have already been served, she will remain at large.

In August 2022, Investigative Committee investigator V. V. Bardakov opened a criminal case against three believers. The men were accused of organizing the activity of an extremist organization, and the woman was accused of participating in it. On the same day, their homes were searched. All three were interrogated and detained.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **27.06.2024 - Another resident of the Bryansk Region was convicted for her faith.**

JW - On June 25, 2024, Tatyana Postavneva, judge of the Unecha District Court of the Bryansk Region, found Yuliya Globa guilty of extremism. English teacher, 42, got a 2,5-year suspended sentence for practicing her religion.

In May 2023, the Investigative Committee of the Bryansk Region opened a criminal case against the believer. The investigation considered the conversations with people about the Bible to be participation in the activities of an extremist organization. Prior to that, Yuliya and her husband Ernest had been searched three times. After 4.5 months of investigative actions the case went to court.

[Continue reading...](#)

## **26.06.2024 - A Court of Appeal upholds the conviction of Jehovah's Witnesses spouses from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky**

JW - On June 25, 2024, the Kamchatka Regional Court upheld the sentence of the court of first instance against Yelena and Sergey Chechulin: 2-year suspended sentences for participating in the activities of an "extremist" organization.

The believers do not agree with the decisions of the courts. Yelena Chechulina noted in her appeal: "The court did not establish the presence of motives of religious hatred or enmity in my actions, and it did not establish against which specific social group I acted. All my actions were completely peaceful." She added: "The law does not consider the confession, including together with others, of the religion to which the liquidated religious associations belonged as a sign of extremism. Therefore, the recognition of a legal entity as extremist is not tantamount to imposing a ban on a religious denomination with its inherent creeds, spiritual terminology, and the procedure for holding worship."

[Continue reading...](#)

## **25.06.2024 - Russia imposes longest sentences yet on Jehovah's Witnesses for 'extremism'**

Reuters - Russia has jailed three Jehovah's Witnesses for more than eight years each for alleged extremist activity, a spokesperson for the faith group said, the harshest sentences it has imposed yet on members of the organisation after hundreds of prosecutions.

New York-based spokesperson Jarrod Lopes said the verdicts were handed down in a case arising from a police raid on a cafe in 2018 where some 50 Jehovah's Witnesses were attending a social, not religious, event.

[Continue reading ...](#)

## **24.06.2024 - Further jail term for answering fellow prisoners' questions about faith?**

Forum 18 - Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Dmitry Terebilov, who has been serving a sentence in a strict-regime labour camp (penal colony) in Kostroma Region, is currently on trial again for having answered questions about his faith from a fellow prisoner. The camp administration has recordings of his conversations. If found guilty, he could receive a further sentence of several years, on top of his present 3-year term.

[Continue reading...](#)

## **24.06.2024 - Three more religious organizations have been added to the list of undesirable organizations**

Sova - On June 21, 2024, the list of organizations whose activities are considered undesirable in the Russian Federation was expanded. The list included three evangelical non-governmental organizations from the United States, Canada, and Finland.

We are talking about two branches of the religious organization "Great Commission Ministry": the Canadian Great Commission Media Ministries (GCMM, "Media Ministry of the Great Commission", "Media Service of the Great Commission Mission") and the American Great Commission Media Ministries (GCMM, "Media Ministry of the Great Commission", "Media Service of the Great Commission Mission") and their affiliate

International Russian Radio & Television (IRR/TV, "International Russian Radio and Television") from Finland.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **24.06.2024 - Khabarovsk court issues harshest verdict against Jehovah's Witnesses since their organizations were banned**

Sova - The court sentenced three of the six defendants to more than eight years in prison.

On June 20, 2024, the Industrial District Court of Khabarovsk sentenced three believers to the maximum prison terms for the entire period of persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses after the ban on their organizations in Russia. The court sentenced Nikolai Polevodov, Vitaly Zhuk, and Stanislav Kim to eight and a half years, eight years and four months, and eight years and two months of imprisonment, respectively, to be served in a general regime penal colony under Part 1 of Article 282.2 (organization of the activities of an extremist organization). Tatyana Zhuk, Svetlana Sedova, and Maya Karpushkina were given suspended sentences under Part 2 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization): five years for Zhuk and Sedova, and four years for Karpushkina.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **23.06.2024 - At least 20 killed in synagogue, church attacks in Russia's Dagestan**

ALjazeera - Three days of mourning have been declared in Russia's North Caucasus region of Dagestan following an attack by gunmen on a church, synagogue and police post.

The death toll from the attacks in the restive Russian region has risen to 20 people, Russia's Investigative

### **20.06.2024 - Who ordered torture of Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience?**

Forum 18 - Fellow medical facility prisoners tortured prisoner of conscience Rinat Kiramov over four days in April after he refused to give names of fellow Jehovah's Witnesses in his home town. They punched, kicked, waterboarded, threatened with rape, and shocked him with a stun gun. It is unclear how the prisoners had access to a stun gun. Kiramov's lawyer lodged a complaint to the Prosecutor's Office, which passed it to police. Whether police investigators have decided to open a criminal case is unknown. The UN Convention against Torture obliges states to arrest and punish officials who commit, order or allow torture. There is a long-standing pattern of impunity for torturers.

Jehovah's Witness Rinat Kiramov, who is serving a 7-year sentence in Tula Region to punish his exercise of freedom of religion or belief, was beaten and tortured in a Federal Penitentiary Service medical facility by inmates who demanded information about other Jehovah's Witnesses in his home town in Astrakhan Region.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **20.06.2024 - Attempted arson of a church in the Nizhny Novgorod region**

Sova - On June 20, 2024, it became known that in the city of Shakhunya in the Nizhny Novgorod region, an unknown person attempted to set fire to a church building. He threw a bottle with an incendiary mixture at the wall of the building. The perpetrator was detained by parishioners, who immediately put out the fire. The arsonist turned out to be a 38-year-old local resident. A criminal case has been opened .

[Continue reading ...](#)

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## To be a Jehovah's Witness is a worse crime than to kidnap or rape

### In comparison

- **According to Article 111 Part 1 of the Russian Federation's Criminal Code, grievous bodily harm draws a maximum of 8 years sentence.**
- **According to Article 126 Part 1 of the Criminal Code, kidnapping leads to up to 5 years in prison.**
- **According to Article 131 Part 1 of the Criminal Code, rape is punishable with 3 to 6 years in prison.**

HRWF (29.06.2024) - On June 2024, the Industrialniy District Court of Khabarovsk (Russia) imposed record prison sentences on three Jehovah's Witnesses. The sentences noted below all exceed the previous high mark of 8 years since the 2017 ban.

- **Nikolai Polevodov:** 8.5 years (for bio, see [link](#))
- **Vitaliy Zhuk:** 8 years, 4 months (for bio, see [link](#))
- **Stanislav Kim:** 8 years, 2 months (for bio, see [link](#))
- Additional convictions in this criminal case:
  - **Vitaliy's wife, Tatyana,** ([link](#)) and **Svetlana Sedova** ([link](#)): 5-year suspended prison sentence
  - **Maya Karpushkina:** 4-year suspended prison sentence (for bio, see [link](#))

The three men were immediately taken into custody in the courtroom. For Nikolai and Stanislav, this is the second time they've been criminally convicted for their faith.

"It's patently absurd for the court to hand down such lengthy sentences, especially when you consider eight years in prison is the maximum term in Russia for violent criminals convicted of grievous bodily harm\*," said **Jarrod Lopes, a spokesperson for world headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses.** "Imposing such severe sentences on peaceful devout men is a mockery of the rule of law, flies in the face of international jurisprudence, and betrays Russia's own constitution. The fictional charges that have led to these record harsh sentences are based solely on prejudice against Jehovah's Witnesses. We hope Russian officials will soon realize that they have grossly misjudged Jehovah's Witnesses and that the police and FSB are wasting precious resources hunting down harmless Christian family men and women, raiding their homes, and imprisoning them. Jehovah's Witnesses want nothing more than to worship peacefully with fellow

believers and to contribute to their local communities—both which are impossible to do from inside a prison cell.”

### **Case history**

In November 2018, a criminal case was opened against six Jehovah's Witnesses after dozens of riot police raided a café, where some 50 Jehovah's Witnesses had gathered for a friendly party. This was a social event, not a religious gathering. Once inside, the police surrounded the Witnesses, forbidding anyone to leave their seats or use their phones and tablets. All of the Witnesses in the café were interrogated (including minors), fingerprinted, and photographed. Many had their tablets and phones confiscated. The raid and subsequent interrogation lasted 5 hours.

As a result, Mr. Kim, Mr. Polevodov, and Mr. Zhuk were placed in a pretrial detention, where they each spent 2 months. They were then put under house arrest for 6 to 12 months.

The case first went to court in July 2019, but due to insufficient evidence it was returned to the prosecutor's office. Some four months later the case was sent back to court. Litigation has taken some five years.

“During the entire trial,” Vitaliy Zhuk said, “I never heard what exactly in my words and actions constituted a crime of an extremist nature and what I had to stop doing in order not to be considered a criminal.” Nikolay Polevodov likewise stated: “All the facts considered during this trial clearly prove that I am being persecuted not for actual crimes, but for my religious views. The prosecution, without providing any evidence, is trying to promote the idea that I committed a crime.”

For more information regarding this case and all of the defendants, see this [link](#).

### **Second-time offenders**

This is the second time Stanislav Kim and Nikolai Polevodov were defendants in a criminal case for their faith. (see [link](#)) The Zheleznodorozhny District Court of Khabarovsk sentenced them to 2 years of suspended imprisonment "for participation in extremist activities," namely for discussing the Bible and basic Christian teachings. Those sentences have been satisfied.

### **Persecution in numbers | Russia and Crimea**

- 2,102 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses raided since 2017 ban
- 811 men and women criminally charged for their belief in God. Of these:
- 427 have spent some time behind bars since 2017. Of these: A total of 170 Jehovah's Witnesses have been convicted and sentenced to prison, including 105 (almost 62%) who received sentences of 5 years or more. Those sentenced to 8 years or more: 9 people

As of today, 134 Jehovah's Witnesses (men and women) remain in prison.

Source: World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses (USA)

**More reading: See [REUTERS](#)**

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## Shootings in several cities of Dagestan, a synagogue and churches attacked

By Willy Fautré

[The European Times](#) (24.06.2024) - **At least 19 people were victims of an attack on police officers, Orthodox churches and synagogues in Dagestan Derbent and Makhachkala on Sunday evening. Five attackers were killed, the authorities said: two in Derbent and three in Makhachkala.**

The head of Dagestan Sergey Melikov said at night that "more than 15 policemen" and several civilians "were victims of today's terrorist attack." On Monday morning, the Investigative Committee of Russia (ICR) confirmed the death of 15 security forces and four civilians, including an Orthodox priest.

In the morning, the counter-terrorist operation regime was lifted in Makhachkala and Derbent. A criminal case under the articles on terrorist attack, illegal possession and theft of firearms. A three-day mourning has been declared in Dagestan. According to [Interfax](#), "In the days of mourning, state flags will be lowered throughout the territory of the republic. Cultural institutions and television and radio companies located in Dagestan will cancel all entertainment, entertainment events and programs."

The Russian Union of Travel Industry (PCT) [recommended](#) temporarily refraining from traveling to the region. Those in the republic were urged to take precautions. According to the Association of Tour Operators of Russia (ATOR), there can be up to 20,000 tourists in the republic.

### ***Synagogues and churches attacked***

In Derbent, the terrorists attacked the Church of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos on Lenin Street. As a result of the attack, Archpriest Nikolai Kotelnikov, who served in the church for more than 40 years, was killed. "Father Nikolai was killed in a church in Derbent, his throat was cut," Shamil Khadulayev, Deputy Chairman of the Public Supervisory Commission of Dagestan, wrote in a telegram on Sunday.

They also attacked the Kele-Numaz synagogue on Tagi-Zade Street with machine guns shortly before the evening prayer, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported. A strong fire broke out in the synagogue as a result of the attack. It was extinguished only at night.

A similar attack was committed in Makhachkala. There, a traffic police post on Yermoshkin Street, next to which there is a synagogue, was shelled. Several police officers were killed. RIA Novosti, citing the rabbi, reported that no one was injured in the synagogue.

Another shootout was near the Holy Dormition Cathedral on Ordzhonikidze Street. The church guard died, one of the parishioners told TASS. "As soon as the shooting began, we closed from the inside," he said. 18 people were barricaded in the church – clergymen and parishioners. At night, they were taken out by employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. "No one was hurt," said an Interfax source.

### ***Some religious data***

According to a survey in 2012, 83% of the population of Dagestan adheres to Islam and 2.4% to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Dagestanis adherents of Islam are largely Sunni Muslims of the Shafii school. On the Caspian coast, particularly in and around the port city of [Derbent](#), the population (primarily made up of Azerbaijanis) is Shia. A Salafi minority is also present.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there has been an Islamic revival in the region. By 1996, Dagestan had 1,670 registered mosques, nine Islamic universities, 25 madrassas, 670 maktab. It is estimated that "nearly one in five Dagestanis was involved in Islamic education."

The number of Protestants among the non-Slavic indigenous population is very low, with estimates between 2,000 and 2,500. Most of these are Pentecostal Christians from the [Lak](#) ethnicity. The largest congregation is Osanna Evangelical Christian Church (Pentecostal) in Makhachkala, with more than 1,000 members.

A number of native [Tati](#)-speaking Jews – the so-called "[Mountain Jews](#)" – are also present in Dagestan. However, since 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, many have migrated to Israel and the United States. These were an extension of much larger [Azerbaijani Jewish](#) community across the border with Azerbaijan.

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## **Heavy prison terms for 9 Jehovah's Witnesses in the occupied territory of Crimea**

By Willy Fautré

[The European Times](#) (21.06.2024) - Nine Jehovah's Witnesses living in the occupied territory of Crimea are currently serving heavy prison terms of 54 to 72 months for exercising their right to freedom of assembly and worship in private houses:

- 4 years 1/2: Vladimir Maladyka (60), Vladimir Sakada (51) and Yevgeniy Zhukov (54)
- 5 years and 3 months: Aleksandr Dubovenko (51) and Aleksandr Litvinyuk (63),
- 6 years: Sergey Filatov (51), Artem Gerasimov (39) and Igor Shmidt
- 6 years 1/2: Viktor Stashevkiy

Releases should not be expected until 2016 in six cases, 2017 in one case and 2018 in two cases.

In Russia the government has not only banned the Witnesses' legal entities but it has clearly shown its intent to wipe out their peaceful worship.

Since the [ban of their religion in April 2017](#), the authorities have conducted numerous raids on their gatherings throughout the country, resulting in the arrest and imprisonment of scores of Witnesses. The same heavy-handed tactics have also been used against Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea.

The first mass raid in Crimea took place on 15 November 2018, in Dzhankoy, when approximately 200 police and special forces officers raided eight private homes in which small groups of Witnesses were meeting together to read and discuss the Bible.

At least 35 armed and masked officers forcibly entered the home of Sergey Filatov, where a group of six Witnesses were gathered. The Witnesses were terrorized by this aggressive action. The intruders pinned a 78-year-old man against the wall, forced him to the ground, handcuffed him, and beat him so badly that he was rushed to the hospital. Two other older men were so traumatized that they were rushed to the hospital with extremely high blood pressure. Tragically, a young woman whose house was also raided suffered a miscarriage.

Following the raid, Sergey Filatov was criminally charged under Article 282.2(1) of the Russian Criminal Code with organizing the activity of an "extremist organization." On 5 March 2020, the district court in Crimea sentenced him to six years in a general regime prison colony.

In the years following the 2018 raid in Dzhankoy, special forces officers continue to forcibly enter the homes of Witnesses who were suspected of the 'extremist activity' of worshipping. The most recent raid occurred on 22 May 2023. At 6:30 in the morning, more than ten officers, five of whom were armed, entered a home in Feodosia. They ordered the Witnesses to lie on the floor while they searched the home for more than three hours. One of the male Witnesses was detained and taken to Sevastopol for questioning.

As of 21 June 2024, 128 Jehovah's Witnesses were serving a prison term in Russia and 9 more in occupied Crimea. All have been charged with promoting the activities of an 'extremist organization.' See the documented cases in [HRWF Database of FORB Prisoners](#).

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## Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest June 01-15

### 16.06.2024 - Russia tries to erase evangelical churches from occupied Ukraine

Wall Street Journal - The church's erasure from view is part of a sweeping crackdown inside Russian-held territory on religious groups that aren't under Moscow's control, especially the evangelical Christian faiths the Kremlin considers instruments of U.S. influence in Ukraine.

Mykhailo Brytsyn, the church's Baptist pastor, said he was questioned by Russian soldiers for four hours and told: "You don't run a church. You run a nest of American spies."

[Continue reading...](#)

### 14.06.2024 - In St. Petersburg, Baptists received access to the building of the House of Gospel

Sova - In June 2024, it became known that the Baptists of St. Petersburg gained access to the building of the House of the Gospel, the struggle for which continued for several years.

The community received the keys to the building on May 16, and on May 18 the first service since 1930 took place.

Let us remind you that for several years Baptists could not gain access to their house of worship, since the building is surrounded by the territory of the Elektroapparat plant. The Association of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Region even went to court to defend the right to the building. Now the community is starting to rebuild the Gospel House.

### 12.06.2024 - The appeal upholds the verdict for faith to Yelena Chernykh from Prokopyevsk - three years suspended

JW - On June 11, 2024, the sentence for **Yelena Chernykh**, one of Jehovah's Witnesses from Prokopyevsk, entered into force. The judicial board of the Kemerovo Regional Court agreed with the three-year suspended sentence assigned to her but excluded from the additional punishment the deprivation of the right to participate in public and religious associations.

"The court has not established that I have any motives of religious hatred or enmity. All my actions were completely peaceful," said the believer, 47, as she appealed. "I believe in God, talk to others about the Bible, share my beliefs with them, pray to Jehovah God, sing songs of praise to him." Yelena concluded that she was convicted for the usual profession of faith for Jehovah's Witnesses, and not for any extremist actions.

### [Continue reading...](#)

#### **11.06.2024 - Olga Ivanova, convicted in 2021 for believing in God, released from a penal colony in Zelenokumsk**

JW - After spending a little more than 2 years and 3 months in a penal colony, Olga Ivanova, a 41-year-old Jehovah's Witness, was released on June 11, 2024. She has served her sentence in full.

In correctional colony No. 7 in the Stavropol Territory, Ivanova had to work hard in the cutting shop. Her mother said: "I was so tired that in the morning I wanted to cry, because I didn't rest during the night, and I had to go back to work for 12 hours. Work even on Saturday, one day off." For health reasons, Olga has been released from work in the shop for the past few months.

### [Continue reading ...](#)

#### **11.06.2024 - A resident of Derbent was fined for possessing a banned book**

Sova - In early June, it became known that on April 24, 2024, the Derbent City Court of the Republic of Dagestan fined local resident Kamil Suleymanov one thousand rubles. He was found guilty under Art. 20.29 Code of Administrative Offenses (mass distribution of extremist materials).

The reason for drawing up an administrative protocol against Suleymanov was the possession of two copies of a banned book by Safi al-Rahman al-Mubarakfuri entitled "The Life of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace" (translated from Arabic by Abdullah Nirsha). As stated in the court ruling, a resident of Derbent put the book up for sale in a store.

### [Continue reading...](#)

#### **10.06.2024 - One of Jehovah's Witnesses from Izhevsk placed in pre-trial detention center after searches**

Sova - In May 2024, it became known that on April 18, the Tuapse City Court of the Krasnodar Territory fined Tajik citizen Jalili Saidzoda for "illegal missionary work."

According to the court, Saidzoda "carried out missionary activities in the city of Tuapse without notifying in writing the body authorized to make a decision on the state registration of a religious organization, on the beginning of religious activities, including: on the basics of religion, on the places of worship in his place of residence and on citizens belonging to a religious group."

### [Continue reading ...](#)

#### **10.06.2024 - Cassation Court in Kemerovo left Pavel Kazadaev behind bars**

Sova - **Pavel Kazadaev** from Barnaul will remain in a penal colony to serve his sentence — On June 6, 2024, the Eighth Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction in Kemerovo approved the verdict and appeal decision in the case of the believer.

In August 2023, Kazadaev's case took an unexpected turn: instead of the 3-year suspended sentence imposed by the court, the court of appeal, satisfying the prosecutor's petition, sent the believer to a colony for the same period.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **10.06.2024 - WSJ: Russia aims to erase evangelical churches from occupied Ukraine**

Euromaidanpress - Russia is engaged in a sweeping crackdown against evangelical Christian churches and religious groups in areas of Ukraine it has occupied, part of a campaign by Moscow to assert dominance over the territories and reshape them in its own authoritarian image, according to WSJ.

Ukrainian and US officials along with clergymen report that evangelical pastors have been disproportionately affected in Russian occupied areas, with dozens abducted, tortured, and forced into exile from their hometowns. In one instance, a deacon from a Pentecostal church in Kherson Oblast and his 19-year-old son were found dead in a forest in the fall of 2022 following their arrest by Russian forces.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **07.06.2024 - The case against Jehovah's Witnesses from Kovrov was brought to court**

Sova - The believer is accused of participating in the activities of an extremist organization.

On June 7, 2024, the office of the Investigative Committee for the Vladimir Region announced the completion of the investigation into the criminal case against Jehovah's Witnesses from Kovrov, and the materials were transferred to the court. The believer is accused under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization).

According to investigators, the accused has been a member of the local cell of Jehovah's Witnesses since 2009 and continued his participation in it until August 2023, despite the ban on the organization as extremist. In particular, the believer participated in religious meetings and preached, he had the status of a "ministerial servant" in the organization.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **04.06.2024 - One of convicted Jehovah's Witnesses from Akhtubinsk was tortured**

JW - A resident of the Astrakhan region, **Rinat Kiramov**, sentenced to 7 years in prison for his beliefs, was tortured in medical correctional institution No. 3 of the Tula region, as he was demanded to incriminate his fellow believers. This is stated in the appeal of Kiramov's lawyer to the prosecutor's office.

In April last year, Rinat Kiramov and two other believers were convicted of talking with friends on biblical topics. Rinat Kiramov was sent to serve his sentence in colony No. 6 of the Tula region. However, on April 18, 2024, Kiramov was transferred to the medical correctional institution No. 3 of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia in the Tula Region in connection with the suspicion of tuberculosis.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **04.06.2024 - Russia: Towards a liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church?**

Bitter Winter - Then they came for the Catholics. The Greek Catholic Church, i.e., the Eastern church that maintains the Greek traditions and liturgy but is in full communion with Rome, is not banned in Russia. Several of its parishes operate in the Omsk region.

There, however, the FSB raided last April the Greek Catholic Parish of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and detained its priest, 57-year-old Father Igor Maksimov, charging him with the crimes of "insulting the religious feelings of believers in places intended for worship" and "rehabilitation of Nazism."

[Continue reading...](#)

### **03.06.2024 - Russian Human Rights Commissioner acknowledged the detention of two UGCC clergymen by Russia**

Risu - This was reported by the News of Zaporizhzhia.

The statement likely refers to two priests from Berdyansk, Ivan Levytsky and Bohdan Geleta, of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

As usual for the Russian side, the statement was accompanied by manipulations and accusations against Ukraine, alleging that it has ignored requests for the exchange of both the clergymen and 500 Ukrainian military personnel held captive.

The report even included a quote from the Kremlin's captives, expressing the clergymen's sole desire to see their families as soon as possible.

[Continue reading...](#)

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## **A Russian Jehovah's Witness was sentenced to 8 years in prison**

### **In comparison**

- **According to Article 111 Part 1 of the Russian Federation's Criminal Code, grievous bodily harm draws a maximum of 8 years sentence.**
- **According to Article 126 Part 1 of the Criminal Code, kidnapping leads to up to 5 years in prison.**
- **According to Article 131 Part 1 of the Criminal Code, rape is punishable with 3 to 6 years in prison.**

[The European Times](#)/ Sova Center/ HRWF (23.05.2024) - On May 16, 2024, the Samara Regional Court confirmed the sentence of Jehovah's Witness Alexander Chagan to 8 years in prison under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization).

On February 29, 2024, the Central District Court of Togliatti sentenced Chagan to eight years in a penal colony. In addition to the main punishment, Chagan was assigned a year of restriction of freedom and a three-year ban on participation in activities related to religious organizations.

The criminal case against the Jehovah's Witness was initiated on September 14, 2022 - the investigation was carried out by the Central Interdistrict Investigation Department of Togliatti of the Investigative Committee of Russia in the Samara region. According to the investigation, the believer was involved in "involving citizens in the banned extremist organization "Advernal Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia". On September 21 of the same year, his apartment, as well as Vladimir Zubkov's, were searched. Later, Chagan was assigned a preventive measure in the form of a travel ban. In July 2023, the case

was brought to court. After the verdict was announced, he was detained in the courtroom.

The accusation of Jehovah's Witnesses of involvement in the activities of an extremist organization is due to the fact that in April 2017, the Supreme Court of Russia decided to recognize the Management Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and their 395 local religious organizations as extremist. This decision, which led to the mass persecution of believers under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code, had no legal basis, and can be interpreted as a manifestation of religious discrimination.

In June 2022, the ECHR issued a [ruling](#) on the complaint of Jehovah's Witnesses, in which it recognized that the prohibition of their organization, the closure of all their local associations and the prosecution of their members/believers were contrary to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

The ECHR demanded the termination of criminal cases under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code against Jehovah's Witnesses and the release of their members in detention.

### Sources

- The appeal in Samara left the harsh sentence of the Jehovah's Witness unchanged - 8 years in prison. Message from Jehovah's Witnesses. 2024. May 21.
- The court in Togliatti sent Alexander Chagan to the colony for 8 years for his faith in Jehovah God. Message from Jehovah's Witnesses. 2024. March 1.
- According to social media reports.
- [In Togliatti, the activities of a religious association whose activities are prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation have been suppressed](#) // Website of the Investigative Committee of Russia in the Samara region. 2022. September 23.
- Searches in Togliatti: armed security forces infiltrated the believers through the window. Message from Jehovah's Witnesses. 2022. September 26.

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## 68-year-old Jehovah's Witness sentenced to 2.5 years of forced labor

[Sova Center](#) (16.05.2024) - On March 16, 2024, the Orel Regional Court approved the sentence of Jehovah's Witness Tatiana Piskareva. She was sentenced to two and a half years of forced labor and six months of restriction of freedom under Part 2 of Art. 282 of the Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization).

Piskareva's sentence was issued by the Soviet District Court of Orel on March 1, 2024. During the debate of the parties on February 21, the state's prosecutor asked to impose five years of imprisonment. However, the court considered it possible to assign her only two and a half years and replace her imprisonment with forced labor (under Art. 53.1 of the Criminal Code).

The local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Orel was [declared](#) extremist in 2016.

Sova-Center believes that the decisions of Russian courts to ban Jehovah's Witnesses' communities, which led to the mass prosecution of believers under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code, had no legal grounds and are a manifestation of religious discrimination.

In June 2022, the ECHR issued a [resolution](#) on the complaint of Jehovah's Witnesses, in which it recognized that the prohibition of their materials and organizations and the

persecution of believers were contrary to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and demanded the termination of criminal cases under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code against Jehovah's Witnesses and the release of believers in detention.

## Sources

- [The Appeal in Oryol Upheld the Sentence of 68-year-old Tatyana Piskaryova: 2.5 Years of Forced Labor for Faith in Jehovah](#)// JW-Russia. 2024, May 20.
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  - [Criminal case card № 22-572/2024](#) // Orel Regional Court. 2024. May 16.
  - [Soviet District Court of the city of Orla was sentenced against an adherent of an extremist organization banned in the Russian Federation, "Jehovah's Witnesses "Eagle"](#) // Soviet District Court of Orel. 2024. March 4.
  - [A resident of the city of Orel was convicted of participating in the activities of a banned extremist organization](#) // GSU IC of Russia in the Orel region. 2024. March 5. Piskareva's case in Orel. Message from Jehovah's Witnesses. 2024. February 21.
  - [A resident of the city of Oryol will stand trial for participating in the activities of a banned extremist organization](#) // SU SK in the Orel region. 2023. March 7.
- 

## Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest May 16-31

### 29.05.2024 - The bill banning the privatization of property for religious purposes was adopted in the first reading

Sova - On July 13, 2023, the State Duma adopted in the first reading a bill banning the privatization of religious property that is state or municipal property. Let us recall that the bill "On Amendments to Article 3 of the Federal Law "On the Privatization of State and Municipal Property" and Article 21 of the Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations"" provides for a ban on the transfer of religious property from state ownership to all third parties, for with the exception of religious organizations.

As Sergei Gavrilov, Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Property, Land and Property Relations, explained, the law on the transfer of state or municipal property to religious organizations, as well as the law on freedom of conscience and on religious associations, do not contain a direct ban on the alienation of religious property appointments in a general manner, so authorities were still able to sell such objects to third parties. Now a ban is being introduced on the transfer of such property, and transactions involving the alienation of religious property made since 2010 will be declared void.

### [Continue reading...](#)

### 29.05.2024 - In Moscow, a court declared void a transaction on the transfer of property of Jehovah's Witnesses to an Austrian organization

Sova - On May 27, 2024, it became known that the Golovinsky District Court of Moscow satisfied the claim of the prosecutor's office of the Northern Administrative District of the city to invalidate the agreement for the donation of non-residential premises. We are

talking about property in Moscow, which the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia donated to the religious association of Jehovah's Witnesses in Austria.

By court decision, this property was converted into the property of the Russian Federation.

Let us recall that Jehovah's Witnesses began to transfer the property of their communities to foreign organizations after the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses and 395 local organizations were liquidated as extremist in 2017.

### **29.05.2024 - A bill banning niqabs has been introduced to the State Duma**

Sova - On May 28, 2029, a bill was introduced to the State Duma giving regional and municipal authorities the right to ban the wearing of niqabs and other religious clothing that covers the face.

The developer of the bill was the first deputy head of the New People faction in the State Duma, Vladislav Davankov.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **28.05.2024 - In the Smolensk region, the case of burning a Bible was brought to court**

Sova - On April 26, 2024, the Dorogobuzhsky District Court of the Smolensk Region received the case of Mikhail Kirpichenkov and Andrey Kushnerev, accused under Part 3 of Art. 30, part 1 art. 148 of the Criminal Code (attempt to insult the religious feelings of believers). On May 13, the case was transferred for jurisdiction to the magistrate's court.

From the materials of the cases of Kirpichenkov and Kushnerev on administrative offenses, published on the website of the Dorogobuzh court, and the story of Kushnerev himself to the OVD-Info project, it follows that on February 11, 2024, they set fire to the Bible and began to film the burning process on a mobile phone camera. According to Kushnerev, it was decided to burn the book due to "disagreement with the Russian Orthodox Church."

[Continue reading...](#)

### **27.05.2024 - In Kuban, a citizen of Tajikistan was fined and expelled from the country for "illegal missionary work."**

Sova - In May 2024, it became known that on April 18, the Tuapse City Court of the Krasnodar Territory fined Tajik citizen Jalili Saidzoda for "illegal missionary work."

According to the court, Saidzoda "carried out missionary activities in the city of Tuapse without notifying in writing the body authorized to make a decision on the state registration of a religious organization, on the beginning of religious activities, including: on the basics of religion, on the places of worship in his place of residence and on citizens belonging to a religious group."

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **24.05.2024 -In Kotelniki, Muslims were detained during prayer and sent to the military registration and enlistment office**

Sova - On May 24, 2024, police officers and the Lyubertsy military registration and enlistment office conducted a raid, during which they came to the prayer house in 2nd Pokrovsky Proezd Kotelnikov. At this time, Friday prayer was being held there.

The security forces removed all the men from the premises and took many of them to the military registration and enlistment office, from where they were immediately sent to a collection point.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **24.05.2024 - 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.

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...](#)

### **23.05.2024 – Greek Catholic parish liquidated in Omsk**

Sova - On May 22, 2024, the Omsk Regional Court granted the claim of the regional department of the Ministry of Justice for the liquidation of the local Greek Catholic parish of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose minister was accused under two articles of the Criminal Code. The reason for the liquidation was some gross violations of federal legislation.

The violations, which the Ministry of Justice considered irreparable, were "identified during a joint inspection of the department, the prosecutor's office of the Omsk region and the FSB directorate for the Omsk region."

[Continue reading...](#)

### **22.05.2024 - Court of Appeal in Samara upheld the verdict of four believers: 7 years imprisonment**

JW - On May 20, 2024, the Samara Regional Court upheld the harsh sentence of Aram Danielyan, Denis Kuzyanin, Sergey Polosenko and Nikolay Vasilyev, who will have to spend 7 years in a penal colony for peaceful religious activity.

In the appeal, the defense drew the court's attention to the fact that the believers were charged with organizing the activity of a Samara legal entity liquidated by a separate court decision in 2014. Therefore, the verdict could not be based on the decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, only issued a few years later, in 2017. Peacefully singing religious songs, praying, and pronouncing the name of God, Jehovah, cannot be considered as evidence of extremist actions. Despite the arguments of the defense, the court denied the appeal of the defendants, who attended the hearing via video link from the pre-trial detention center.

[Continue reading....](#)

### **20.05.2024 - In Abakan, the court confiscated a plot of land from Pentecostals**

Sova- In April 2024, it became known that on March 28, the Abakan City Court satisfied the bailiff's claim against the local religious organization of Christians of the Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals) "Church of Glorification" for the seizure of a land plot for debts. The fine was imposed on the church in July 2022; the religious organization did not pay it. Taking into account penalties, the amount of debt amounted to 849,082 rubles 16 kopecks. It is not known why the community was fined.

The Abakan court seized a plot of land to settle the debt, and also collected a state duty of 300 rubles from the religious organization.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **17.05.2024 - The head of a religious organization in Mordovia was fined for "illegal" missionary work**

Sova - On May 15, 2024, it became known that in the Krasnoslobodsky district of Mordovia, the court fined the 66-year-old head of a Christian center under Part 3 of Art. 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (carrying out activities by a religious organization without indicating its full official name, including the production or distribution within the framework of missionary activities of literature, printed, audio and video materials without marking with the specified name or with incomplete or deliberately false marking).

[Continue reading...](#)

### **17.05.2024 - Viktor Stashevskiy can become the first Jehovah's Witness to be sent from penal colony to prison for fictitious violations**

JW - On May 2, 2024, the judge of the Apsheronkiy District Court of the Krasnodar Territory ruled to satisfy the colony's submission and transfer Viktor Stashevskiy from the colony to prison for 3 years.

According to the law, those who are convicted of especially dangerous crimes, such as terrorism, hostage-taking, massacres, etc. should be sent prisons. Conditions in prisons are much more difficult than in colonies: prisoners are in cramped, locked cells, often solitary confinement. If convicts in colonies live in barracks and move freely around the territory, then possibility to walk in prison is strictly limited - for example, walks take place under escort in a small courtyard, over which a grate or barbed wire is fixed. Also, in prison, convicts cannot work and study any specialty.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **17.05.2024 - The court in Primorye once again refused to transfer shaman Gabyshev to a softer type of treatment**

Sova - On May 16, 2024, it became known that the Ussuriysky District Court of the Primorsky Territory again refused to transfer the Yakut shaman Alexander Gabyshev from a specialized psychiatric hospital to a general psychiatric hospital. Psychiatrists insisted on transferring Gabyshev to a milder type of treatment, but the court decided to reject the request to change compulsory medical measures

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## Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest May 01-15

### 15.05.2024 - The investigation into the case of a 27-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Chelyabinsk has been completed

Sova - Believer Maxim Khamatshin is accused of organizing the activities of an extremist organization.

On May 15, 2024, the Directorate of the Investigative Committee for the Chelyabinsk Region reported on the completion of the investigation against the 27-year-old Jehovah's Witness - he is accused under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization). Judging by the message from the Investigative Committee, we are talking about believer Maxim Khamatshin.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### 14.05.2024 - Court of Cassation in Vladivostok upheld the sentence of four believers from Tynda

JW- On May 14, 2024, the Ninth Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction in Vladivostok confirmed the sentence of four Jehovah's Witnesses. **Vladimir Bukin, Valeriy Slashchev and Sergey Yuferov** will continue to serve their prison sentences of 6 years and 4 months, and **Mikhail Burkov** — 6 years and 2 months.

The case of the believers from Tynda was considered twice — the first verdict was overturned by the court of appeal, but later the Tyndinskiy District Court of the Amur Region nevertheless found them guilty and sentenced them to imprisonment. This decision was upheld by the court of appeal. In their cassation appeal, the believers drew attention to them being named as guilty in the verdict only for participating in meetings for worship, preaching the religious teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, encouraging others to continue following the beliefs and studying the religious literature of Jehovah's Witnesses.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### 13.05.2024 - Three Jehovah's Witnesses from Izhevsk each received three years in a penal colony for their faith

JW - On May 13, 2024, Marina Khokhryakova, judge of the Pervomayskiy District Court of Izhevsk, found **Maksim Derendyaev, Aleksandr Kutin and Sergey Ashikhmin** guilty of extremism and sentenced each to 3 years imprisonment in a penal colony (the prosecutor had requested 7 years each). The believers were taken into custody in the courtroom. They intend to appeal the verdict.

As an additional punishment, the court banned each of them from carrying out any activity in public and religious associations for 4 years, and further restricted their freedom for 1 year.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **13.05.2024 - The US Commission on International Religious Freedom again noted egregious violations in Russia**

Sova - On May 1, 2024, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) published its annual report. The report's authors once again ranked Russia among the countries with the most flagrant violations of religious freedom.

In particular, the report mentions the ongoing persecution of religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, followers of Falun Gong, Allah Ayat, Turkish theologian Said Nursi, believers of Protestant churches, and the Church of Scientology. In addition, the authors of the report noted the inclusion of new religious organizations in the list of undesirable organizations, and believers as foreign agents, as well as the ongoing persecution of citizens for insulting the religious feelings of believers.

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### **13.05.2024 - Convicted 61-year-old Jehovah's Witness is regularly sent to the punishment cell despite serious health problems**

**Alam Aliyev**, one of Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to 6.5 years in a penal colony for his faith, spent 28 days in the punishment cell of Penal Colony No.8 in the Amur Region. The conditions of detention there are not suitable for Aliyev's health – he has diabetes, kidney disease, heart problems and neurological disorders.

Simply put, a punishment cell (SHIZO) is a "prison within a prison". The prisoner's rights are significantly restricted, for example, he is forbidden to lie down during the day, visits and telephone conversations are prohibited and there are restrictions on receiving parcels.

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### **08.05.2024 - Krasnodar Territory Court upheld the sentence to Danil Suvorov from Sochi for his beliefs: 6 years in prison**

JW - On May 7, 2024, the Court of Appeal considered the complaint of Jehovah's Witness Danil Suvorov against the sentence for his faith. The panel of judges agreed that the 28-year-old believer is guilty of extremism and should serve his sentence of 6 years in a penal colony.

In June 2023, Yekaterina Ostapenko, judge of the Central District Court of Sochi, found **Danil Suvorov** guilty of committing crimes under Parts 1.1 and Part 2 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. By that time, the believer had spent almost two years in jail. Then for about a year he was behind bars awaiting an appeal.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### 07.05.2024 - In Moscow, Falun Gong followers were detained in a criminal case for cooperation with an undesirable organization

Sova - On May 3, 2024, four Falun Gong followers were detained in Moscow. Their homes were searched in connection with the case of collaboration with an undesirable organization.

Case under Part 3 of Art. 284.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (carrying out 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) was opened by the Tushino Interdistrict Investigation Department of the Investigative Directorate for the North-Western Administrative District of the Main Investigative Directorate of the Investigative Committee of Russia in Moscow.

[Continue reading...](#)

### 06.05.2024 – How Putin humors Xi Jinping: Crackdown on Moscow’s Falun Gong

Bitter Winter - After the start of its war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia is often described as a satellite state of China, from which it increasingly depends for economic survival and military supplies.

One casualty of this state of affairs is Falun Gong. The movement poses no threats to Russia, and for years it has been depicted with benevolence by most Russian media, which even praised its Qigong practices as beneficial for the practitioners’ health. Even after, under Chinese pressure, key Falun Gong texts were declared “extremist” in 2008, activities in Russia continued.

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### 03.05.2024 - In the Primorsky Territory, a court imposed suspended prison sentences on four Jehovah's Witnesses

Sova - Nikolai Dikhtyar and Andrei Lyakhov were found guilty of participating in the activities of a banned community, Yuri Ponomarenko and Oleg Sergeev - in its organization.

On May 2, 2024, the Pozharsky District Court of the Primorsky Territory found four Jehovah’s Witnesses from Luchegorsk guilty of continuing the activities of the banned community. The court sentenced **Yuri Ponomarenko** to six and a half years, and **Oleg Sergeev** to six years and four months of suspended imprisonment under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization), **Andrey Lyakhov** - two years and eight months, **Nikolai Dikhtyar** - two and a half years of suspended imprisonment under Part 2 of the same article (participation in the activities of an extremist organization). The believers were also given an additional punishment in the form of restriction of freedom for a period of one to one and a half years.

[Continue reading...](#)

### 02.05.2024 - The court acquitted a Jehovah's Witness from Kabardino-Balkaria

Sova - Kirill Gushchin was accused of organizing the activities of a banned community and involving in it.

On May 2, 2024, the Maysky District Court of Kabardino-Balkaria sentenced Jehovah's Witness Kirill Gushchin, who was accused under CC. 1 and 1.1 art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organizing the activities of an extremist organization and involvement in its activities). The court completely acquitted the believer.

During the debate between the parties, which took place on March 19, 2024, the state prosecutor asked to find Gushchin guilty and sentence him to seven years in prison to be served in a general regime colony. He also asked the court to send Gushchin into custody until sentencing, but this was denied, and the defendant remained under recognizance not to leave.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **01.05.2024 - Russia, anti-cultist scares children with a new Bogeyman**

Bitter Winter - Be afraid. Be very afraid. A certain R.S., who claims to have been at the event, directed me to pictures of a lecture the notorious Russian anti-cultist Archpriest Alexander Novopashin gave to children of Suzun, in Novosibirsk Oblast, on April 24. Novopashin, who looks like a madman and increasingly also behaves like one, is Vice President of Russia's main anti-cult association, which until March 2023 was part of FECRIS, the French-supported European umbrella anti-cult organization.

[Continue reading...](#)

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## **Three Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to three years in prison**

**JW Russia** – (13.05.2024) - On May 13, 2024, the judge of the Pervomaisky District Court of Izhevsk, Marina Khokhryakova, found Maksim Derendyaev, Aleksandr Kutin and Sergey Ashikhmin guilty of extremism and sentenced each to 3 years in prison in a penal colony (the prosecutor requested 7 years each). The believers were taken into custody in the courtroom. They intend to appeal the verdict.

As an additional punishment, the court forbade everyone to carry out any activity in public and religious associations for 4 years, and additionally restricted their freedom for 1 year.

The investigation considered the conversations about God and the Bible to be the organization of the activities of an extremist organization, and in the spring of 2021, a criminal case was opened against Derendyaev, Kutin and Ashikhmin. Mass searches took place in Izhevsk. As a result, Maksim Derendyaev and Aleksandr Kutin ended up in a pre-trial detention center, where one stayed for 3 months, and the second for 15 days. Sergey Ashikhmin was released under a ban on certain actions, taking into account the serious operation he undergone.

After 2 years of trial, Maksim Derendyaev, 38, said: "I have not been able to understand what my actions the prosecution considers a crime. For 4 years, a hidden record was kept against me. This is about 1,000 hours of conversations in a relaxed atmosphere between family members, fellow believers, including on everyday topics, and not a single extremist statement!"

Friends help the families of believers with the hardships caused by unjust criminal prosecution: they support them financially, give them cards and letters with words of love and encouragement. Aleksander Kutin, 41, said: "When letters from different countries and regions began to arrive, it made a strong impression on one of my neighbors—this is a real brotherhood, and when you get into trouble, they will not abandon you, but they will support and help." In court, Kutin stated: "The criminal case was initiated and brought to trial with the sole purpose of prohibiting me from practicing my religion that is not prohibited by law and living as written in the Bible. The investigation is trying to make us criminals who broke the law. But we didn't break the law of the land."

Sergey Ashikhmin, 50, speaking with the last plea, [emphasized](#): "There have never been any extremist motives in my actions, because love and extremism are incompatible!"

In Udmurtia, [criminal cases](#) were initiated for their faith against seven Jehovah's Witnesses.

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## Over 1000 conscientious objectors carrying out a civilian service

[OVD](#) with HRWF (19.04.2024) - Alternative civil service (ACS) is a normal job instead of serving in the army but lasts longer: 21 months instead of 12. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian conscripts have been increasingly demanding to replace their military service with the ACS.

According to [Rosstat](#), 1,140 citizens were carrying out alternative civil service in Russia in the second half of 2023. The largest number of [conscientious objectors](#) is in St. Petersburg with 69 people. The second and third places were shared by the Moscow region (64 people) and Moscow (42 people). This is very small number, given the total number of recruits.

In addition, there are regions where no one is performing alternative service: Arkhangelsk and Novgorod regions, Transbaikalia and Kamchatka, the republics of Altai and Tuva and several others.

The war in Ukraine, according to Rosstat, did not affect the number of objectors. Nevertheless, human rights activists in a conversation with "Vot Tak" noted that during the full-scale [invasion](#), draft commissions and courts began to refuse to grant the ACS status more often but there are no accurate statistics on such cases.

Many of those who seek the ACS are not sent anywhere later. They are either just waiting or they are released from military service for health reasons. Since military registration and enlistment offices are not interested in organizing the ACS and transferring information to Rostrud to select alternatives to the military duty. See testimonies of applicants for the ACS status [HERE](#) with the automatic translation if needed.

### **Constitutional provisions and implementation**

The right to ACS for Russian citizens is guaranteed by the Constitution (Article 59, Part 3).

It is available to representatives of small indigenous peoples who lead a traditional lifestyle, carry out traditional economic activities and are engaged in traditional crafts but there are few of them. Most conscientious objectors invoke their religious beliefs when they apply for the ACS status. See full details [HERE](#) with the automatic translation.

### **Alexei Tabalov, human rights activist and director of the Conscript School**

"We are now witnessing a negative trend: conscription commissions are increasingly denying conscripts the replacement of military service with AGS, and often unmotivated, without even listening to them. And the courts are increasingly taking the side of the draft commissions and do not want to delve into the fact that the fundamental circumstance for resolving the issue of the ACS should be beliefs, not formal grounds in the form of missing deadlines."

### **Lawyer Arseny Levinson**

Lawyer Arseny Levinson [studied](#) 350 court decisions related to the AGS for 2021 and the first half of 2022. 40 people have won the right to alternative service. In most cases, the courts denied the defendants. The most common reasons for refusal are violations by conscripts of the deadlines for applying for the AGS and "unproven" of beliefs.

### ***Alternative civilian service: The law***

[Forum 18](#) (19.12.2023) - Article 59, Part 3 of the Constitution states: "A citizen of the Russian Federation, if the performance of military service contradicts his beliefs or religion, as well as in other cases established by federal law, has the right to replace it with alternative civilian service".

Under Russian law, the Constitution takes priority over all other legislation, but the right to alternative service is not absolute, despite the absence of any conditions in Article 59.

The 2002 Law on Alternative Civilian Service sets out the procedures of applying for, granting, and carrying out ACS. According to Article 2, a man has the right to replace military service by conscription with alternative civilian service if: "performing military service is contrary to his beliefs or religion"; or "he belongs to the indigenous people of the Russian Federation, leads a traditional way of life, carries out traditional economic activities and is engaged in traditional crafts of the indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation".

To exercise this right, however, an individual must submit an application to be considered by the Conscription Commission (a nominally independent body comprising representatives of the local civilian authorities and Military Commissariat), which decides to accept or refuse it. If successful, the applicant undergoes a medical examination and is then assigned to work at a state or municipal institution (for 21 months) or in a civilian role in the armed forces (for 18 months), usually (though not always) outside his home region.

Possible ACS deployments in 2023 included both skilled and unskilled jobs in - among others - Culture Ministry and Agriculture Ministry organisations, hospitals and polyclinics, nursing homes, and educational institutions. Members of indigenous groups may be assigned to organisations employed in traditional economic activities.

Only small numbers of those called up each year undertake ACS. Lawyer Sergey Chugunov noted on his Telegram channel on 3 May 2023 that as of 1 February 2022, 1,138 people were in the process of doing ACS, while the total number of young men called up in the autumn conscription in 2021 was 127,500.

Both conscripts who do military service and those who do ACS are enrolled in the reserves upon completion, rendering them liable to call-up in the event of mobilisation. Several individuals who served in the army as conscripts, but who did not want to fight in Ukraine on grounds of their religious beliefs, have found themselves assigned to military units anyway, given the [lack of provision for ACS for reservists](#), and have had to challenge their mobilisation in court, with little success.

Only one person who refused call-up on religious grounds, Protestant Pavel Mushumansky, [is known to have had his mobilisation ruled unlawful](#).

On 1 January 2024, an amendment to the Law on Military Service will come into force which raises the upper age limit for conscription from 27 to 30, thus creating a much larger pool of potential draftees. The lower limit will remain at 18, despite earlier proposals to raise it to 21. Men who turn 27 before the end of 2023 (and have not yet done military – or alternative – service) will not be liable to be called up, the State Duma noted on its website on 25 July.

### ***Four young Baptists denied the ACS status***

[Forum 18](#) (19.12.2023) - According to Forum 18, Military officials rejected the alternative civilian service applications of four young Baptists in Siberia and the Far East. The four men had all set out their pacifist religious convictions.

**Brothers Daniil and German Strelkov** are preparing to appeal after a court ruled the refusals lawful. Courts twice declined to uphold **Zakhar Asmalovsky's** lawsuit against the military authorities. **Timofey Reznichenko** successfully challenged his refusal in court, gaining the right to have his application re-examined.

A higher-level Conscription Commission granted a fifth, Sergey Myalik, the right to undertake alternative service.

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## **How Putin humors Xi Jinping: Crackdown on Moscow's Falun Gong**

***A woman has been arrested on May 3 and three other practitioners held as witnesses.***

By Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (06.05.2024) - After the start of its war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia is often described as a satellite state of China, from which it increasingly depends for economic survival and military supplies.

One casualty of this state of affairs is Falun Gong. The movement poses no threats to Russia, and for years it has been depicted with benevolence by most Russian media, which even praised its Qigong practices as beneficial for the practitioners' health. Even after, under Chinese pressure, key Falun Gong texts were declared "extremist" in 2008, activities in Russia continued. In 2020, seven Falun-Gong-related organizations were

declared “undesirable” in Russia, but until the 2022 war in Ukraine the label “undesirable,” unlike “extremist,” did not totally prevent organizations from operating in the country.

Russian and European anti-cultists part of the international federation FECRIS, on the other hand, continued to express support for the bloody repression of Falun Gong in China and to call for harsher measures elsewhere. Certain Western branches and leaders of the FECRIS were “subcontracted” to publicly deny that Falun Gong practitioners in China are victims of the criminal practice of organ harvesting, although that this is the case has been [affirmed twice](#) by the European Parliament.

After the aggression against Ukraine, the law on “undesirable” organizations was amended in Russia and now “undesirable” and “extremist” organizations for all practical purposes are treated in the same way.

On May 3, [special forces raided](#) in Moscow the private homes of several Falun Gong practitioners. They arrested Natalia Minenkova as “leader” of an “undesirable” organization and held another three practitioners as witnesses. According to the state-owned agency “[RIA Novosti](#),” they are also accused of a much more serious crime, i.e., “attempting to organize color revolutions in Russia and China with the direct support of the US State Department.”

On April 16, a woman found in possession of Falun Gong literature and accused of sharing it with others had been [arrested by the FSB](#) in Pyatigorsk.

On May 4, a judge from the Tushinsky District Court in Moscow confirmed the detention of Minenkova for one month and twenty-five days, pending further investigations.

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## **A court sentenced the candidate for membership of Hizb ut-Tahrir**

[Sova](#) (18.04.2024) - On April 17, 2024, the Southern District Military Court sentenced a citizen of Tajikistan Haydarali Ashurov. The court found him guilty of preparing to participate in a terrorist organization (Part 2 of Art. 205.5 with the application of Part 1 of Art. 30 of the Criminal Code), public calls for extremism (Part 1 of Art. 280 of the Criminal Code) and justification of terrorism (Part 1 of Art. 205.2 of the Criminal Code). He was sentenced to seven years in prison with the first three years in prison, and the balance in a maximum security colony.

The arrest of the previously convicted of theft of Ashurov [was reported](#) on June 9, 2022. In total, 13 people suspected of involvement in the radical Islamic party Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is recognized as a terrorist organization in Russia, were detained in Rostov at that time.

According to the investigation, with which the court agreed, from April 21, 2020, Ashurov was preparing to join Hizb ut-Tahrir and for this purpose studied its ideology on the acquired literature and video materials from the Internet. In 2021, he asked a former party member to help him join it, but was refused. Even after that, Ashurov did not abandon his aspirations, the court believes.

In addition, from April 26 to August 23, 2020, Ashurov held "public meetings" in Rostov-on-Don, during which, according to the investigation and the court, he spoke approvingly about the activities of terrorist organizations and the need to commit violent actions against a certain group of people on the basis of attitude to religion.

After his detention, Ashurov stated that he did not admit guilt, we note that he did not know the persons who testified against him, and also did not own banned books seized by operatives during a search at his place of residence.

We believe that the ban on the Islamic Hizb ut-Tahrir party is not groundless, but the prosecution under Art. 205.5 of the Criminal Code for involvement in it (holding meetings, reading literature, etc.) in the absence of convincing accusations of other terrorist crimes leads to a clearly disproportionate punishment.

As for the charges under Articles 280 and 205.2 of the Criminal Code, we cannot assess them, although we must note that in such cases the court should carefully study the degree of public danger of statements. For more information about the problem of assessing such charges and the proportionality of the penalties imposed, see [here](#).

## Sources

- [It has been established that from April 21, 2020, the defendant in the city of Rostov-on-Don was preparing to take part in the activities of the banned international terrorist organization "Party of Islamic Liberation" \("Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami"\)](#) // Southern District Military Court. Telegram. 2024. April 18.
- [Criminal case card № 1-58/2024 \(1-238/2023;\)](#) // Southern District Military Court. 2024. April 18.

## HRWF comment

The [HRWF Database of FORB Prisoners](#) does not include prisoners charged of being members of Hizb Ut-Tahrir for the following reasons. Hizb Ut-Tahrir means "Liberation Party" and describes itself as a "global Islamic political party and/or religious society" (European Court of Human Rights [Hizb Ut-Tahrir and Others v. Germany](#)). Hizb Ut-Tahrir is identified by the ECtHR as a Muslim political movement, not a religious community. While we contend their members cannot be considered FORB prisoners (Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights), we consider they can be prisoners of conscience if they are arbitrarily arrested and sentenced to prison terms despite non-violent activities.

See as well HRWF articles "[UK: Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami proscribed as a terrorist group](#)" and "[UK: Hizb ut-Tahrir proscribed as a terrorist group and the European Court](#)"

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## **Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest April 16-30**

### **27.04.2024 - A case on insulting the feelings of believers has been initiated in Ulyanovsk**

Sova - On April 26, 2024, the Investigative Department of the Investigative Committee of Russia for the Ulyanovsk region reported on the initiation of a criminal case under Part 1 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (insulting the religious feelings of believers) against a 39-year-old resident of the regional center.

According to the investigation, from 2014 to 2021, the Ulyanovsk man posted "images and texts containing mockery of the images revered in Christianity" on social networks from 2014 to 2021.

From our point of view, the indefinite concept of "insulting the religious feelings of believers" introduced into Art. 148 of the Criminal Code, does not and cannot have a clear legal meaning. We do not know the content of the publications made by a resident of Ulyanovsk, but we believe that in cases where certain statements incite hatred against followers of a religion, such actions can be qualified under Art. 20.3.1 of the Administrative Code. Otherwise, law enforcement agencies should not have initiated a case at all.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **26.04.2024 - The owner of the house in Chuvashia, where Hare Krishna meetings were held, was warned**

Sova - On April 23, 2024, the Office of Rosreestr for the Chuvash Republic announced a warning to the owner of a residential building in the village of Pikhtulino, where meetings of the Cheboksary Society for Krishna Consciousness were held.

Neighbors complained about the use of the house as a religious object. The inspection carried out by land inspectors revealed a violation of land legislation.

Deputy Head of the Regional Department of Rosreestr Sergey Vasyukov explained that "the law allows the use of its residential premises for worship, but establishes the limits of such actions - it is unacceptable to use the premises if it, having lost the signs of residential, acquires signs of a cult or administrative premises of a religious organization."

In this case, as the inspectors established, the building was originally built as a cult, although the site is intended exclusively for residential development.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **25.04.2024 - Jehovah's Witness from Primorsky Krai was sentenced to 6 years and 2 months imprisonment**

Sova - On April 25, 2024, the Pozharsky District Court of Primorsky Krai sentenced Anton Virich, a 44-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Dalnerechensk. The court sentenced him to six years and two months of imprisonment in a general regime colony under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization).

During the debate of the parties on April 11, 2024, the state prosecutor asked the court to sentence Virich to six and a half years in prison and a year of restriction of liberty.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **25.04.2024 - Archbishop fined for criticising Russia's war in Ukraine**

Forum 18 - A Krasnodar Region court found 87-year-old Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov guilty on 8 April of repeatedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces. The judge fined him 8 months' local average pension. Archbishop Viktor has repeatedly condemned Russia's war against Ukraine as "aggressive" and "Satanic". Many parishioners of Holy Intercession Tikhonite Church in Slavyansk "have been scared away by recent events", says a church member. Archbishop Viktor is the fifth person criminally convicted for criticising Russia's war from a religious perspective. Many more have been punished administratively.

Eighty-seven-year-old Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov has become the fifth person to receive a criminal conviction for criticising Russia's war in Ukraine from a religious perspective. Slavyansk City Court in the southern Krasnodar Region found him guilty on 8 April of repeatedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces, and fined him 150,000 Roubles, nearly eight times the local average monthly pension.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **24.04.2024 - The rector of the Greek Catholic church in Omsk was placed under house arrest, the parish was under threat of liquidation**

Sova - Priest Igor Maksimov is accused of rehabilitating Nazism and insulting the feelings of believers: images stylized as icons depicting Ukrainian nationalists were found in the refectory of the church.

On April 24, 2024, the Kuibyshev District Court of Omsk placed 57-year-old priest Igor Maksimov, rector of the local Greek Catholic Church of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos, under house arrest. The regional department of the Ministry of Justice sent an administrative claim to the regional court for the liquidation of the parish as a religious organization due to gross and irreparable violations.

The day ever, Maximov was detained, it turned out that a criminal case had been initiated against him under Part 1 of Art. 354.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (rehabilitation of Nazism) and Part 2 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code (insult to the religious feelings of believers committed in places intended for worship). He was charged with "being a servant of a local religious organization" "previously placed in the refectory stylized as icons of the "Holy Mother of God" images of Nazi accomplices (S. Bandera, R. Shukhevich, I. Slippy), available for view to an indefinite circle of people.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **24.04.2024 - A Russian Orthodox priest who took part in services for Navalny is suspended by the Patriarch**

AP News - The patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church has suspended a priest who participated in services for the late opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Dmitry Safronov took part in Navalny's funeral as well as presiding at the commemoration on March 26, the 40th day after his death — an important Russian Orthodox tradition.

An order published Tuesday on the Moscow Diocese website demoted Safronov from his position as priest to that of a psalm-reader and stripped him of the right to give blessings or wear a cassock for three years. He also was transferred to another church in the capital.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **23.04.2024 - Now they came for Ak-Jan. The destruction of a new-old religious movement**

Bitter Winter - Russian media recently reported that on April 16 special forces cracked down throughout Altai Republic, in Southern Siberia, on another "extremist cult": "operatives and investigators with the forceful support of the special forces of the Russian Guard, seized extremist literature, computers, phones and money" and arrested several "cultists," including the main leader of the group. It was also reported that in faraway Ulyanovsk (some 3,000 kilometers from Altai) a "cult member" who conspired to overthrow the Putin regime had been arrested.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **18.04.2024 - Judicial statistics on cases of "illegal" missionary work for 2023 have been published**

Sova - On April 17, 2024, the Judicial Department under the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation published statistical information on the number of cases under Art. 5.26 of the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation (violation of the legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations) considered by the courts for 2023.

According to these data, the number of cases considered by the courts under this article decreased slightly compared to [2022](#): during the year, 354 such cases were considered (in 2022 - 388).

228 persons were punished for them: 139 individuals, 74 legal and 15 officials (in 2022 - 238: 144 individuals, 91 legal, 3 officials).

As a punishment, as before, fines are most often used: they were imposed in 190 cases. In 38 cases, a written warning was issued to those prosecuted. In 11 cases, the punishment was supplemented by confiscation, in 9 - by administrative expulsion from the Russian Federation.

The total amount of fines under the resolutions that came into force decreased compared to the previous year and amounted to 2,771,000 rubles (in 2022 - 3,488,000 rubles).

[Continue reading...](#)

### **18.04.2024 – Another Muslim prayer house was demolished in the Moscow region**

Sova - On April 17, 2024, it became known about the demolition of the prayer house "Druzhba" between Mytishchi and Lobnya.

The court made a decision to demolish illegal construction back in 2021. The previous attempt to demolish the building was made in November 2023, but then the community agreed with the authorities to postpone it.

Earlier, the Abu Bakr prayer house was demolished in Troitsk.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **18.04.2024 - Sentenced to forced labor for posting New Generation Church material on social media**

Bitter Winter - The Protestant movement New Generation is a special obsession of Russian anti-cultists and the Federal Security Service (FSV), perhaps because it originated in a Baltic country and has followers in Ukraine.

The Latvian megachurch New Generation is part of the Word of Faith movement, which teaches that those who pray with faith will acquire health and prosperity. In 2021, New Generation was declared "undesirable" in Russia. On August 15, 2022, New Generation churches in Chelyabinsk, Moscow, Kemerovo, Novosibirsk, Krasnodar, and Sochi, were raided by special forces after having being falsely accused by Russian anti-cultists Alexander Dvorkin and Alexander Novopashin, at that time affiliated with the French-supported European federation of anti-cult movements FECRIS, of working as agents of the Ukrainian intelligence services.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **17.04.2024 - Alushtinets was detained in the case of insulting the feelings of believers**

Sova - Case under Art. 148 of the Criminal Code was initiated because of publications about some Orthodox shrines.

On April 15, 2024, the Main Investigation Department of the Investigative Committee of Russia for the Crimea and Sevastopol reported the detention of a 53-year-old resident of Alushta suspected of insulting the religious feelings of believers (Part 1 of Art. 148 of the Criminal Code).

It is alleged that he posted on the social network "photos of Orthodox shrines and unacceptable signatures accompanying them, insulting the religious feelings of believers."

From our point of view, the indefinite concept of "insulting the religious feelings of believers" introduced into Art. 148 of the Criminal Code, does not and cannot have a clear legal meaning. We do not know the content of the images published by a resident of Alushta, but we believe that in cases where certain statements incite hatred against followers of a religion, such actions can be qualified under Art. 20.3.1 of the Administrative Code. Otherwise, law enforcement agencies should not have initiated a case at all.

[Continue reading...](#)

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## **Russia and FECRIS: When a picture is worth a thousand words**

***Archpriest Alexander Novopashin lectures against "Ukrainian recruiters of terrorists" –and continues to display a huge FECRIS logo.***

*By Massimo Introvigne*

[Bitter Winter](#) (22.04.2024) - The strange story between the anti-cult federation FECRIS and Russia continues.

FECRIS is the European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults and Sects, an international anti-cult umbrella organization largely supported by French taxpayers. It has been criticized [by scholars](#) and even by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) for spreading discriminatory attitudes against groups it stigmatizes as "cults." "Bitter Winter" has documented its dangerous connections and support for the bloody repression of minority religions [in Russia and China](#).

One of the largest and most active FECRIS affiliate operated in Russia. Since 2014 (and in fact even earlier), it systematically supported [the aggression against Ukraine](#) by Putin's regime. When Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022, this support became a source of embarrassment for FECRIS. Yet, FECRIS waited [until March 2023](#) to sever its connection with its Russian branch. This means that for more than one year the Russian FECRIS leaders supported Putin's crimes against the Ukrainian people while remaining members of FECRIS in good standing, which caused [strong reactions in Ukraine](#).

FECRIS was compelled by international pressures to put an end to this in March 2023. Or was it really the end?

[On April 18, 2024](#), Archpriest Alexander Novopashin, who is the Vice President of what was until March 2023 the Russian affiliate of FECRIS (the President is the not less notorious anti-cultist Alexander Dvorkin), reported on his own website (in case he will cancel the article, we at "Bitter Winter" have of course preserved it) that in the same day he conducted a seminar on "Destructive Organizations" at Maslyaninsky School No. 1 in the Novosibirsk Region.

He did not say anything new and vituperated as usual against "the war waged by the collective West, represented by the United States and its European henchmen, against our country." He claimed to have evidence that after the recent terrorist attack in Moscow, recruiters, "mostly from Ukraine," "write to Russian schoolchildren and offer to

commit sabotage for several hundred thousand rubles,” adding death threats if they refuse the offer or inform the police.

Nothing is more similar to a lecture by Novopashin than another lecture by Novopashin.

However, what is interesting is that, as late as April 18, 2024, Novopashin lectured by repeatedly showing to its audience a large FECRIS logo and posted the pictures with that logo on his website. Why he exactly did it is unclear. The real relationships between Russian anti-cultists and the FECRIS are known to a happy few only. It seems that the former have with the FECRIS the same relations many Russians have with the bottle of Vodka. They may have been told countless times to put it down—but they simply cannot.

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## **Jehovah’s Witnesses banned since 20 April 2017**

**World Headquarters of Jehovah’s Witnesses (20.04.2024) - April 20<sup>th</sup> marks the seventh anniversary of Russia’s nationwide ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses, which has led to hundreds of peaceful believers jailed and some brutally tortured.**

International human rights advocates are decrying Russia for persecuting Jehovah’s Witnesses, which is eerily reminiscent of the repression the Witnesses faced during the Soviet-era. Experts assert that the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia has been a prelude to the return of large-scale Stalinist oppression.

*“It’s hard to believe this nationwide assault on Jehovah’s Witnesses has continued for seven years. For reasons passing understanding, Russia uses enormous local and national resources to hunt down harmless Witnesses—including those elderly and infirmed—often breaking into their homes in the early morning hours or middle of the night,”* said **Jarrod Lopes, a spokesman for Jehovah’s Witnesses.**

*“During these home raids or when being interrogated, innocent men and women are sometimes beaten or even tortured to give up the names and whereabouts of fellow believers. The Witnesses are criminalized simply for reading their Bibles, singing songs, and peacefully talking about their Christian beliefs. Russian authorities with an unfounded animus for non-Orthodox Christians continue to unconscionably trample on the Witnesses’ human rights and freedom of conscience. Fully aware that their personal faith and integrity are being attacked, the Witnesses have become determined to hold to their convictions.”*

### **Persecution by the numbers in Russia and Crimea since the 2017 ban**

- Over 2,090 homes of Jehovah’s Witnesses raided
- 802 men and women have been criminally charged for their Christian beliefs
- 421 have spent some time behind bars (including [131](#) men and women currently in prison)
- 8 years \* is the maximum prison sentence, up from 6 years [Dennis Christensen was the first to be convicted (2019) and sentenced to prison]
- Over 500 men and women have been added to Russia’s federal list of extremists/terrorists since the ban

In comparison:

- According to Article 111 Part 1 of the Russian Federation’s Criminal Code, **grievous bodily harm** draws a **maximum of 8 years sentence**.
- According to Article 126 Part 1 of the Criminal Code, **kidnapping** leads to **up to 5 years in prison**.
- According to Article 131 Part 1 of the Criminal Code, **rape** is punishable with **3 to 6 years in prison**.

## **The ban—FAQs**

### **How did this all start?**

Russia’s Federal Law “On Combating Extremist Activity” (No. 114-FZ), was adopted in 2002, partly to address concerns about terrorism. However, Russia amended the law in 2006, 2007, and 2008 so that it extends “far beyond any fears of extremism linked to terrorism,” according to the article “[Russia’s Extremism Law Violates Human Rights](#),” published in *The Moscow Times*.

The law “*simply seizes upon the ‘terrorist’ vocabulary that has become commonplace internationally since the 9/11 assault on New York’s Twin Towers, and uses it to describe unwelcome religious groups across Russia,*” explains Derek H. Davis, formerly the director of the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University. Hence, “*the ‘extremist’ label has been unfairly and disproportionately used against Jehovah’s Witnesses,*” says Davis.

In the early 2000s, Russian authorities began banning dozens of the Witnesses’ Bible-based literature as “extremist.” Authorities then framed the Witnesses (see [link1](#), [link2](#)) by planting banned literature in the Witnesses’ houses of worship.

Soon, the Witnesses’ official website, [jw.org](#), was [banned](#), and shipments of Bibles were detained. This campaign escalated to the nationwide ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses in April 2017. Subsequently, tens of millions of dollars of the Witnesses’ religious properties were [confiscated](#).

### **Have things escalated?**

Yes. Russia is handing down some of the harshest prison sentences since the 2017 ban. For example, on Feb. 29, 2024, Aleksandr Chagan, 52, was sentenced to eight years in prison, a punishment typically reserved for those inflicting grievous bodily harm. Chagan is the sixth Witness to receive such a harsh sentence simply for the peaceful practice of his Christian beliefs. As of April 1, 2024, 128 Witnesses are imprisoned in Russia.

We’ve also seen spikes in home raids. For example, there were 183 homes of Witnesses raided in 2023, with an average of 15.25 homes per month. There was a rise in February 2024, with 21 raids reported.

“*Typically, the home raids are conducted by officers armed for mortal combat,*” says Jarrod Lopes, a spokesperson for Jehovah’s Witnesses. “*The Witnesses are frequently dragged out of bed and not fully dressed, while the officers arrogantly record the whole thing. Video footage \*\* of these ridiculous raids is all over the internet and social media. Local police and FSB officials want to make a theatrical spectacle as if they are risking their lives fighting dangerous extremists. It’s an absurd charade, with dire consequences! During the raids or while being interrogated, some Jehovah’s Witnesses have been brutally beaten or tortured. As you can imagine, that is never recorded. However, Jehovah’s Witnesses are neither surprised nor intimidated by Russia’s systematic persecution. It’s well documented in the history of Russia, Nazi Germany, as well as other lands, that the Witnesses’ faith has always outlasted the persecuting regime. We expect history to repeat itself.*”

\*\*see [footage](#) on official state website

## ***Soviet repression of Jehovah's Witnesses | Operation North***

This month marks the 73<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of "Operation North"—the largest mass deportation of a religious group in the history of the USSR—in which thousands of Jehovah's Witnesses were deported to Siberia.

In April 1951, some 10,000 Jehovah's Witnesses and their children from six Soviet republics (Belorussia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova and Ukraine) were essentially kidnapped when authorities deported them in crammed trains to the frozen, desolate landscape of Siberia. This mass deportation was called "[Operation North](#)."

In just two days, the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses were confiscated, and the peaceful adherents were banished to remote settlements in Siberia. Many of the Witnesses were required to work in dangerous and harsh conditions. They suffered malnutrition, disease, and mental and emotional trauma from being separated from their families. The forced deportation also resulted in death for some of the Witnesses.

Many Witnesses were finally released from exile in 1965, but their confiscated properties were never returned.

Despite the government's attempt to eliminate some 10,000 Jehovah's Witnesses from the region, "Operation North did not achieve its goal," according to Dr. Nicolae Fustei, coordinating scientific researcher for the Institute of History in Moldova. "The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses was not destroyed, and its members did not stop promoting their faith but instead began to do it with even more boldness."

After the fall of the Soviet regime, the number of Jehovah's Witnesses spiked.

### ***Exponential growth***

In June 1992, the Witnesses hosted a large scale [international convention](#) in Russia in St. Petersburg. About 29,000 from the former Soviet Union attended along with thousands of delegates from around the world.

The majority of Witnesses deported during Operation North were from Ukraine—over 8,000 from 370 settlements. Yet, on July 6-8, 2018, Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine welcomed thousands for another large [convention](#) held in Lviv, Ukraine. Over 3,300 delegates from nine countries traveled to Ukraine for the program, which appropriately featured the theme "Be Courageous"! Today, there are more than [109,300](#) Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine.

[Visit here](#) for accounts about the impact of Russia's persecution on Jehovah's Witnesses.

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## **Les Témoins de Jéhovah interdits depuis le 20 avril 2017**

**World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses (20.04.2024) - Le 20 avril marque le septième anniversaire de l'interdiction des Témoins de Jéhovah en Russie, ce qui a conduit à l'emprisonnement de centaines de leurs membres dont certains ont été victimes de torture.**

Les organisations internationales de défense des droits de l'homme dénoncent la persécution des Témoins de Jéhovah par la Russie, qui rappelle étrangement la répression qu'ils ont subie à l'époque soviétique. Des experts affirment que cette persécution est le prélude au retour de l'oppression stalinienne à grande échelle.

"Il est difficile de croire que cet assaut national contre les Témoins de Jéhovah se poursuit depuis sept ans. Pour des raisons qui dépassent l'entendement, la Russie utilise d'énormes ressources locales et nationales pour traquer des Témoins inoffensifs, y compris des personnes âgées et handicapées, en déboulant souvent chez eux au petit matin ou au milieu de la nuit", a déclaré Jarrod Lopes, porte-parole des Témoins de Jéhovah.

"Au cours de ces perquisitions ou lors des interrogatoires, des hommes et des femmes innocents sont parfois battus, voire torturés, pour qu'ils livrent les noms de leurs coreligionnaires et indiquent où ils se trouvent. Les Témoins sont poursuivis simplement parce qu'ils lisent leur bible, chantent des hymnes religieux et parlent paisiblement de leurs croyances chrétiennes. Les autorités russes, animées d'une animosité infondée à l'égard des chrétiens non orthodoxes, continuent de bafouer de manière inadmissible les droits de l'homme et la liberté de conscience des Témoins de Jéhovah. Pleinement conscients que leur foi et leur intégrité personnelles sont attaquées, les Témoins sont déterminés à maintenir leurs convictions".

### **Les chiffres de la persécution en Russie et en Crimée depuis l'interdiction de 2017**

- Plus de 2 090 domiciles perquisitionnés
- 802 hommes et femmes ont été inculpés au pénal pour leurs convictions chrétiennes
- 421 Témoins de Jéhovah ont passé un certain temps derrière les barreaux (dont [131](#) hommes et femmes actuellement en prison).
- 8 ans (\*) est la peine d'emprisonnement maximale, contre 6 ans auparavant [Dennis Christensen, un citoyen danois vivant en Russie, a été le premier à être reconnu coupable (2019) et condamné à une peine d'emprisonnement].
- Plus de 500 hommes et femmes ont été ajoutés à la liste fédérale russe des personnes et mouvements extrémistes/terroristes depuis l'interdiction.

\* En comparaison :

- Selon l'article 111, partie 1, du code pénal de la Fédération de Russie, les **lésions corporelles graves** sont passibles d'une **peine maximale de 8 ans**.
- En vertu de l'article 126, partie 1, du code pénal, le **kidnapping** est passible d'une **peine maximale de 5 ans d'emprisonnement**.
- En vertu de l'Article 131, partie 1, du code pénal, le **viol** est passible d'une **peine de 3 à 6 ans d'emprisonnement**.

### **L'interdiction**

#### **Comment tout cela a-t-il commencé ?**

La loi fédérale russe "sur la lutte contre les activités extrémistes" (n° 114-FZ) a été adoptée en 2002, en partie pour répondre aux préoccupations liées au terrorisme. Toutefois, la Russie a modifié cette loi en 2006, 2007 et 2008, de sorte qu'elle va "bien au-delà des craintes d'extrémisme liées au terrorisme", selon l'article du Moscow Times "[Russia's Extremism Law Violates Human Rights](#)" (La loi russe sur l'extrémisme viole les droits de l'homme).

La loi "s'empare simplement de la terminologie 'terroriste' qui est devenue courante au niveau international depuis l'attaque du 11 septembre contre les tours jumelles de New York, et l'utilise pour décrire des groupes religieux indésirables en Russie", explique Derek H. Davis, ancien directeur de l'Institut J.M. Dawson d'Études sur l'Église et l'État à

la Baylor University. Ainsi, "l'étiquette 'extrémiste' a-t-elle été utilisée de manière injuste et disproportionnée contre les Témoins de Jéhovah".

Au début des années 2000, les autorités russes ont commencé à interdire des dizaines d'ouvrages bibliques des Témoins de Jéhovah en les qualifiant d'"extrémistes". Les autorités ont ensuite piégé les Témoins en plaçant elles-mêmes de la littérature interdite dans les lieux de culte des Témoins. ([Lien 1](#) – [Lien 2](#))

Le site web officiel des Témoins, jw.org, a rapidement été [interdit](#) et des cargaisons de bibles ont été bloquées. Cette campagne s'est intensifiée jusqu'à l'interdiction nationale des Témoins de Jéhovah en avril 2017. Par la suite, les biens de leur mouvement religieux d'une valeur de dizaines de millions d'Euros ont été [confisqués](#).

### **Les choses se sont-elles aggravées ?**

Oui. Depuis l'interdiction de 2017, la Russie prononce des peines d'emprisonnement extrêmement lourdes. Par exemple, le 29 février 2024, Aleksandr Chagan, 52 ans, a été condamné à huit ans de prison, une peine généralement réservée à ceux qui infligent des lésions corporelles graves. Chagan est le sixième Témoin à recevoir une peine aussi sévère simplement pour avoir pratiqué pacifiquement ses croyances religieuses. Au 1er avril 2024, 128 témoins étaient en prison en Russie.

Nous avons également constaté une recrudescence des perquisitions à domicile. Par exemple, 183 domiciles de Témoins ont été perquisitionnés en 2023, avec une moyenne de 15 domiciles par mois. Il y a eu une augmentation en février 2024, avec 21 raids recensés.

*"Généralement, les perquisitions sont menées par des policiers armés en tenue de combat", explique Jarrod Lopes, porte-parole des Témoins de Jéhovah. "Les Témoins sont souvent tirés du lit, sans être complètement habillés, tandis que les officiers enregistrent tout cela avec arrogance. Les vidéos \*\* de ces raids ridicules font le tour de l'internet et des médias sociaux. La police locale et les fonctionnaires du FSB veulent en faire un grand show comme s'ils risquaient leur vie en combattant de dangereux extrémistes. Il s'agit d'une mascarade absurde, aux conséquences désastreuses ! Lors des descentes de police ou des interrogatoires, certains Témoins ont été brutalement battus ou torturés. Comme vous pouvez l'imaginer, ces faits ne sont jamais enregistrés. Cependant, les Témoins ne sont ni surpris ni intimidés par la persécution systématique de la Russie. L'histoire de la Russie, de l'Allemagne nazie et d'autres pays montre que la foi des Témoins a toujours survécu au régime persécuteur. Nous nous attendons à ce que l'histoire se répète."*

\*\*voir la séquence sur le [site officiel de l'État](#)

### **Répression soviétique des Témoins de Jéhovah - Opération Nord**

Ce mois-ci marque le 73e anniversaire de l'"Opération Nord" - la plus grande déportation massive d'un groupe religieux dans l'histoire de l'URSS - au cours de laquelle des milliers de Témoins de Jéhovah ont été déportés en Sibérie.

En avril 1951, quelque 10 000 Témoins de Jéhovah et leurs enfants, originaires de six républiques soviétiques (Biélorussie, Estonie, Lettonie, Lituanie, Moldavie et Ukraine), ont été pratiquement kidnappés lorsque les autorités les ont déportés dans des trains bondés vers les paysages gelés et désolés de la Sibérie. Cette déportation massive a été baptisée "Opération Nord".

En deux jours seulement, les maisons des Témoins de Jéhovah ont été confisquées et les adeptes pacifiques ont été bannis dans des colonies isolées en Sibérie. De nombreux Témoins ont été contraints de travailler dans des conditions dangereuses et difficiles. Ils ont souffert de malnutrition, de maladies et de traumatismes mentaux et émotionnels dus à la séparation d'avec leur famille. La déportation forcée a également entraîné la mort de certains Témoins.

De nombreux Témoins ont finalement été libérés de leur exil en 1965, mais leurs biens confisqués n'ont jamais été restitués.

Malgré la tentative du gouvernement d'éliminer quelque 10 000 Témoins de Jéhovah de la région, « l'Opération Nord n'a pas atteint son objectif », selon le Dr Nicolae Fustei, chercheur scientifique coordonnateur de l'Institut d'Histoire de Moldavie. "

L'organisation des Témoins de Jéhovah n'a pas été détruite, et ses membres n'ont pas cessé de promouvoir leur foi, mais ont plutôt commencé à le faire avec encore plus d'audace.

Après la chute du régime soviétique, le nombre de Témoins de Jéhovah a explosé.

### **Une croissance exponentielle**

En juin 1992, les Témoins ont organisé une [convention internationale](#) de grande envergure en Russie, à Saint-Pétersbourg. Environ 29 000 personnes de l'ex-Union soviétique y ont participé, ainsi que des milliers de délégués du monde entier.

La majorité des Témoins déportés dans le cadre de l'"Opération Nord" étaient originaires d'Ukraine - plus de 8 000 dans 370 colonies pénitencières. Pourtant, du 6 au 8 juillet 2018, les Témoins de Jéhovah d'Ukraine ont accueilli des milliers de personnes lors d'un autre grand [congrès qui s'est tenu à Lviv](#), en Ukraine. Plus de 3 300 délégués de neuf pays se sont rendus en Ukraine pour participer au programme, qui avait pour thème "Soyez courageux" ! Aujourd'hui, l'Ukraine compte plus de [109 300](#) Témoins de Jéhovah.

**Pour en savoir plus sur l'étendue de la persécution des Témoins de Jéhovah en Russie, [cliquez ici](#).**

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## **Religious persecution and issues – Bimonthly Digest April 01-15**

### **15.04.2024 - Archbishop fined for criticising Russia's war in Ukraine**

Forum 18 - A Krasnodar Region court found 87-year-old Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov guilty on 8 April of repeatedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces. The judge fined him 8 months' local average pension. Archbishop Viktor has repeatedly condemned Russia's war against Ukraine as "aggressive" and "Satanic". Many parishioners of Holy Intercession Tikhonite Church in Slavyansk "have been scared away by recent events", says a church member. Archbishop Viktor is the fifth person criminally convicted for criticising Russia's war from a religious perspective. Many more have been punished administratively.

Eighty-seven-year-old Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov has become the fifth person to receive a criminal conviction for criticising Russia's war in Ukraine from a religious perspective. Slavyansk City Court in the southern Krasnodar Region found him guilty on

8 April of repeatedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces, and fined him 150,000 Roubles, nearly eight times the local average monthly pension.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### 15.04.2024 - Security forces raid on Cheboksary mosque

Sova - On April 12, 2024, on the third day of Eid al-Fitr, about 20 armed people in balaclavas and with dogs entered the Bulgar mosque in Cheboksary. There were no identifying marks on those who came; they refused to introduce themselves.

Those who came blocked the exits from the mosque and began checking the documents of those present at the Juma prayer. Immigrants from Tajikistan with Russian passports were taken to the military registration and enlistment office to check their status.

### 13.04.2024- In Prokopyevsk, Yelena Chernykh, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, was given a 3-year suspended sentence for her faith.

J.W- **Yelena Chernykh**, a 47-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Prokopyevsk, was found guilty of extremism for continuing to practice her faith. The corresponding verdict was passed on April 12, 2024 by the judge of the Tsentralniy District Court of Prokopyevsk, Yelena Karamova, who sentenced the believer to 3 years of suspended imprisonment.

In 2020, Yelena and her husband Yuriy, parents of three children, one of whom is a minor, were searched, after which they were interrogated as witnesses in the case of Andrey Vlasov (now he is serving time in a colony for his faith). The Department of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Kemerovo Region opened a criminal case against Yelena under Part 2 of Article 282.2. of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. The investigation and the court considered the usual practice for all Jehovah's Witnesses in the world of joint discussions of the Bible and Christian teachings "participation in the activities of a banned religious organization." According to the investigation, Yelena's actions posed a threat to the state and society, incited interreligious discord, although during the trial not a single fact of a real crime or evidence of intention to commit it was presented.

[Continue reading...](#)

### 11.04.2024 - An appeal in Moscow upheld the verdict of five Jehovah's Witnesses.

JW - By decision of the Moscow City Court, on April 10, 2024, the sentence came into force for **Ivan Chaikovskiy, Yuriy Chernyshev, Vitaliy Komarov, Sergey Shatalov and Vardan Zakaryan**. More than 150 people came to support the believers at the courthouse, but only about 20 were allowed into the courtroom.

The criminal prosecution has been going on for about three and a half years. In November 2020, law enforcers staged a high-profile mass raid on the homes of Muscovites. One of them, Vardan Zakaryan, was beaten during the raid and ended up in hospital. The men were accused of organizing the activities of an extremist organization and involving others in it because of conversations about the Bible with an embedded agent who feigned interest in this book.

[Continue reading...](#)

#### 10.04.2024 - The verdict of three Jehovah's Witnesses from Orel was confirmed

Sova - Previously, the court sentenced the believers to six years in prison. On April 8, 2024, the Oryol Regional Court confirmed the verdict of Jehovah's Witnesses **Vladimir Piskarev, Vladimir Melnik and Artur Putintsev** under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code on organizing the activities of an extremist organization. Earlier, on October 13, 2023, the Sovetsky District Court of Orel sentenced the believers to six years in a general regime colony with one and a half years of restriction of freedom.

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

[Continue reading...](#)

#### 10.04.2024 - The verdict against three believers in Oryol came into force after an appeal.

JW - On April 8, 2024, a panel of judges of the Oryol Regional Court, chaired by Judge Yuliya Orlovskaya, approved six years in prison for the faith of **Piskarev, Melnik and Putintsev**. Taking into account the 3 years and 4 months spent in pre-trial detention before the verdict came into force, they may be released in April 2025.

The accusation of organizing the activities of an extremist organization and participating in it was based on audio recordings of a biblical speech that Piskarev rehearsed aloud in his apartment. As a result, on October 13, 2023, the judge of the Sovetskiy District Court of the city of Oryol, Natalya Tishkova, found three believers guilty.

[Continue reading...](#)

#### 09.04.2024 - A 66-year-old Jehovah's Witness, Valeriy Baylo, was detained in the Krasnodar Territory.

JW- On April 2, 2024, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, 66-year-old **Valeriy Baylo**, was detained in the village of Kholmanskaya, Krasnodar Territory. According to preliminary data, his apartment was searched.

Two days later, the Abinsk District Court chose a measure of restraint for the believer in the form of detention. Currently, he is in pre-trial detention center No. 3 of Novorossiysk. Previously, Valeriy Baylo was a witness in the criminal case of Aleksandr Ivshin, who is already serving a sentence for his faith in the colony.

[Continue reading ...](#)

#### 09.04.2024 - Jehovah's Witness from Tolyatti sentenced to three years in prison

Sova - **Alexander Dolganov** was sentenced under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code. On April 8, 2024, the Avtozavodsky District Court of Tolyatti sentenced Jehovah's Witness Alexander Dolganov. The court found him guilty under Part 2 of Art. 282.2 of the

Criminal Code (participation in the activities of an extremist organization) and sentenced him to three years in prison.

During the debate, which took place on April 1, the state prosecutor asked the court to sentence Dolganov to five years in prison in a general regime colony with a restriction of freedom for 10 months.

[Continue reading...](#)

#### **08.04.2024 - A new search on Sakhalin.**

JW- On April 3, 2024, in the city of Poronaysk, Sakhalin Region, a search was carried out at the home of **Daler Tokhtayev**, 33, and his wife. The believer was detained and taken to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. He is accused of extremism.

At about 8 a.m., law enforcement officers, including two FSB officers, came to work for Daler Tokhtayev. From there, they took the believer to his home, where his wife was, and searched there until 11:30 a.m. Electronic devices, personal records and the Bible were seized from the spouses. The search warrant was issued by the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk City Court on February 22, 2024.

[Continue reading...](#)

#### **05.04.2024 - The sentence of Sona Olopova from Tolyatti came into force after an appeal—two years of forced labor for believing in Jehovah God**

JW - On April 3, 2024, the Samara Regional Court upheld the conviction of **Sonya Olopova**—2 years of forced labor. The court considered her participation in collective discussions of the Bible via video link to be extremism.

In her appeal, Sona noted that the court of first instance did not consider ordinary religious practice as an exercise of the right to freedom of religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, which the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation did not prohibit. Instead, in the opinion of the believer, only the fact of professing a religion was enough for the court to pass a sentence. The court did not clarify or establish any other circumstances. Speaking with her last word before the judicial board, she said: "The materials of my criminal case do not contain a single criminal act, not a single statement against the state, against people of other religions, against people of other nationalities."

[Continue reading...](#)

#### **04.04.2024 - In Goryachy Klyuch, the Court sentenced Pavel Sidorenko to three years suspended for talking about the Bible.**

JW- **Pavel Sidorenko**, 66, a resident of a suburb of Krasnodar, received a suspended sentence of 3 years for talking to local residents about the Bible. The decision in his case on April 3, 2024, was made by the judge of the Goryachy Klyuch city court Zhanna Velichko.

In 2019, the believer brought an Orthodox encyclopedia to work to show his colleagues the name "Jehovah" contained in it. An acquaintance of Pavel Sidorenko handed over copies of the pages of this publication to the security forces. After that, the FSB began wiretapping telephone conversations and found out that he had talked about the Bible

with several local residents. This was enough to initiate a criminal case against Sidorenko on extremism in January 2022. His house was searched, and the believer was placed under recognizance agreement.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **02.04.2024 - The Court of cassation upheld the verdict of three Jehovah's Witnesses from Taganrog.**

JW - On March 28, 2024, the Fourth Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction in Krasnodar finally approved the verdict for believers from Taganrog: **Aleksandr Skvortsov and Vladimir Moiseyenko**—7 and 6 years in a penal colony, respectively, and **Valeriy Tibiy**—6 years suspended.

Skvortsov and Moiseyenko attended the hearing via videoconference from the penal colony where they are serving their sentences. In the courtroom were Tibiy and his wife, as well as listeners who came to support the believers. Only Moiseyenko and Tibiy were able to speak before the panel of judges, Skvortsov was not given a word. The judges stayed in the deliberation room for 5 minutes. They dismissed the cassation appeals.

[Continue reading...](#)

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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](#)*



[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."

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## **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 Orakazi 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.

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## **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.

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## **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.

[Continue reading ...](#)

### **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.

[Continue reading...](#)

### **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."

[Continue reading...](#)

### **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

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## 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 Industrialny 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...](#)

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## **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.

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## **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.

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## **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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### **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.

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### **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.

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### **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...](#)

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## **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.**

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## **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.

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## 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...](#)

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## **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.



**Sergey 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 50<sup>th</sup> 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 tiny pieces of the Kremlin'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.

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## 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.

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## **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...](#)

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## **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.

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## **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 Rummyantsev, 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.

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