

7 June 2021

RUSSIA: Oldest Jehovah's Witness – and first woman - jailed

By Victoria Arnold, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

In July 2020, Valentina Baranovskaya suffered a stroke. In February 2021, Abakan City Court jailed the 70-year-old for two years to punish her for meeting fellow Jehovah's Witnesses for worship, a verdict her lawyer described as "devoid of all sympathy and compassion". Her son was jailed for six years. Baranovskaya is the oldest - and first female - Jehovah's Witness to be jailed since Russia banned all their activity. Two in their sixties - Yuri Savelyov and Aleksandr Ivshin – are serving long jail terms.

Seventy-year-old Valentina Baranovskaya has become the oldest person and the first woman to be imprisoned for meeting fellow Jehovah's Witnesses for worship since the Supreme Court banned Jehovah's Witness activity throughout Russia in 2017. Abakan City Court in the Khakasiya Republic jailed her on 21 February for two years. At the same trial, the court jailed her 46-year-old son Roman Baranovsky for six years.

Baranovskaya was also the first Jehovah's Witness to receive a prison term under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity") (see below).

Baranovskaya suffered a stroke in July 2020, just as her trial was beginning. Despite her age and ill health she will spend nearly two years in a general-regime prison camp, after a court ruling her lawyer described as "devoid of all sympathy and compassion" (see below).

She is among a number of elderly Jehovah's Witnesses facing criminal prosecution for exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief. Many of them are in poor health which they say has been exacerbated by the stress of criminal investigations and trials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571).

So far, three people aged 60 or over have been jailed, 12 have received suspended sentences, and two have received fines. Another received a prison term but was released because he had already served the time in detention during the investigation and trial.

The longest sentence yet on a Jehovah's Witness was imposed in February 2021, when a Krasnodar Region court handed Aleksandr Ivshin, aged 63, a seven and a half year jail term. In December 2020, a court in Novosibirsk jailed Yuri Savelyov, now aged 67, for six years (see below).

They are among 29 Jehovah's Witnesses (and one Muslim who met others to read theologian Said Nursi's works) sentenced to imprisonment since May 2018 for exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief (full list here (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2663)).

The Baranovskys and Ivshin were not detained or placed under house arrest during their investigations and trials, so will have to serve close to their full terms. Savelyov, who spent more than two years in detention before his conviction, is due for release in September 2023, Jehovah's Witnesses believe (see below).

The court ordered that a Bible seized from Ivshin's home – "The Bible: Contemporary Translations of Biblical Texts" – be destroyed, despite its not having been banned as "extremist". This translation was published in Minsk in 1993. The court ordered the destruction despite a 2015 amendment to the Extremism Law which prohibits banning the Bible, the Koran, the Tanakh, and the Kanjur as "extremist" (see below).

Anton Lopatin, Senior Assistant to the Krasnodar Regional Prosecutor, however, claimed to Forum 18 that the "so-called 'Contemporary Translation'" Bible had been declared "extremist" and banned from distribution. It is unclear whether Lopatin's claim and the court's destruction order is a case of misidentification. It is not yet known whether the Bible destruction has been carried out (see below).

Forum 18 wrote to Russia's General Prosecutor's Office on 27 May 2021 about all three cases, asking why prosecutors had requested jail sentences, why the imprisonment of people in their 60s and 70s was deemed necessary, why collective prayer and Bible reading

were considered criminal offences, and who had been harmed by the defendants' activities. Forum 18 received no response by the end of the working day in Moscow of 7 June.

Since Baranovskaya's conviction, courts have jailed another three Jehovah's Witnesses under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215):

- Oleg Danilov jailed for three years on 30 March in Abinsk (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2663) (Krasnodar Region);

- Aleksandr Shcherbina jailed for three years on 6 April (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2663), also in Abinsk;

- and Rustam Seidkuliyeu jailed for two years and six months on 20 May (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2663) in Saratov.

Numbers still rising – over 100 Jehovah's Witnesses now convicted

More than 470 Jehovah's Witnesses remain under investigation, are on trial, or have been convicted as a direct result of the Supreme Court's 2017 liquidation of the national-level Administrative Centre and its subsidiaries (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297) and the consequent ban on their activities throughout the country.

A total of 104 of them have now received sentences, including 10 fines, 66 suspended sentences, and 28 prison terms (though several court decisions have not yet come into force, as appeals are still pending). Two other Jehovah's Witnesses have been convicted of "continuing the activities" of the local Jehovah's Witness religious organisation in Oryol, which was liquidated as "extremist" in 2016 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2228), before the nationwide ban. One of them - Danish citizen Dennis Christensen - has been imprisoned (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2479).

Only one Jehovah's Witness has been acquitted, (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2620) in their case of an "extremism"-related offence unconnected to the 2017 ban.

Courts in Russia's illegally annexed (<https://www.nhc.no/en/qa-breaches-of-international-law-and-human-rights-issues-2/>) territories of Crimea and Sevastopol have also sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims to imprisonment for exercising their freedom of religion and belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2648).

Muslims who meet to study the writings of Turkish theologian Said Nursi may also be prosecuted under the Extremism Law for organising or participating in the activities of "Nurdzhular". This organisation was banned as "extremist" in 2008 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215), but Muslims in Russia deny any such formal organisation ever existed. 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.

No trials are currently underway of Muslims who met to study Nursi's works, but three people are facing prosecution in the Tatarstan and Dagestan Republics (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2624).

At present, only one person who met with others to read Nursi's works remains imprisoned – Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev (born 16 February 1977). A court in Dagestan sentenced him in May 2018 to eight years' imprisonment plus two years of restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2386) for alleged involvement in "Nurdzhular".

Raids on Jehovah's Witness homes continue

The Investigative Committee, police, the FSB security service, and National Guard troops continue to raid Jehovah's Witness homes. Some of the raids have included torture, with no arrests or trials of suspect torturers (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2623). The most recent known raids were in Kemerovo Region on 8 June, Khabarovsk Region on 5 June, Lipetsk Region on 1 June, and Altay Region on 27 May. Prosecutions are currently underway in 64 of Russia's 83 federal subjects.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in May 2020 adopted a wide-ranging Opinion (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2573) condemning the "ever-growing number of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia who have been arrested, detained and charged with criminal activity on the basis of mere exercise of freedom of religion".

Punishments

After being kept under FSB or police surveillance for some months, most targeted Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of Nursi's works are prosecuted for "organising" (Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1), or "participating in" (Part 2), "the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation

or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity".

The manifestations of freedom of religion and belief being prosecuted under both these parts of Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215) are very similar. They include meeting in each other's homes to pray and sing together, study sacred texts, and to discuss shared beliefs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2624).

Possible punishments are:

Part 1 – six to 10 years' imprisonment; or a 400,000 to 800,000 Rouble fine;

Part 2 – two to six years' imprisonment; a 300,000 to 600,000 Rouble fine; or one to four years' assigned work.

Several Jehovah's Witnesses have also been charged under Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing extremist activity"), apparently by continuing to collect donations for activities from other Jehovah's Witnesses after the 2017 ban on Jehovah's Witness activity.

Possible punishments are: three to eight years' imprisonment; a 300,000 to 700,000 Rouble fine; or one to four years' assigned work.

Other charges have been brought against Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation").

Possible punishments are: four to eight years' imprisonment; a 300,000 to 700,000 Rouble fine; or two to five years' assigned work.

The average monthly salary before tax for those in work was 51,351 Roubles in 2020, according to the Federal State Statistical Service. Salaries can vary widely, however, both between and within regions. In the capital city of Moscow, the average pre-tax salary in 2020 was 100,070 Roubles per month. In the Nenets Autonomous Region (among several regions of northern Russia where many people work in the well-remunerated natural resources sector), it was 92,237 Roubles – while in the central regions of Oryol and Ivanovo monthly pay was 31,862 and 29,082 Roubles respectively. The Republic of Khakasiya's monthly salary in 2020 was 43,800 Roubles, Krasnodar Region's 38,498 Roubles, and Novosibirsk Region's 41,533 Roubles.

The average pension in Russia in 2020 was 15,059 Roubles per month.

Judges can also impose a range of restrictions on freedom both during suspended sentences, and for certain periods after a person's release from imprisonment.

People convicted under particular articles of the Criminal Code, including the "extremism"-related articles most often applied to Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims who meet to read Nursi's works, are also subject to administrative supervision (administrativniy nadzor) after their release from prison. The nature and duration of this is decided by a court at the request of the prison administration six months before release.

Administrative supervision can incorporate a range of restrictions, including a ban on leaving one's home town or region, a night-time curfew, a ban on attending mass public events, and a requirement to register with probation authorities a certain number of times per month. Imam Komil Odilov, who was convicted under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 for meeting other Muslims to study Nursi's works (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2391), was placed under administrative supervision for eight years until 2027 after his release from prison in March 2019 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2478).

Prosecutions

Despite the similarities in the manifestations of freedom of religion and belief being prosecuted, including meeting in each other's homes to pray and sing together, study sacred texts, and to discuss shared beliefs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2624), trials have so far ended in a variety of sentences. These have ranged from prison terms of several years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2663), to suspended sentences of varying lengths, to a range of fines (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2620). There has also been one sentence of assigned work (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2510), later changed to a fine (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2581).

No one prosecuted in cases relating to the 2017 nationwide ban on Jehovah's Witnesses (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297) has been acquitted, though judges have returned some cases to prosecutors who later resubmit them. Defendants have sometimes succeeded in getting sentences reduced, or having cases sent for retrial on appeal, though no conviction has yet been overturned.

Russia's illegally annexed (<https://www.nhc.no/en/qa-breaches-of-international-law-and-human-rights-issues-2/>) territories of Crimea and Sevastopol have also seen three jailings of Jehovah's Witnesses and four convictions of Muslims accused of membership

of the Tablighi Jamaat missionary movement. Most recently, Jehovah's Witness Viktor Stashevsky was jailed on 29 March for six and a half years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2648) in an ordinary regime labour camp.

Khakasiya Republic: Oldest Jehovah's Witness prisoner

On 24 February 2021, Valentina Ivanovna Baranovskaya (born 8 April 1951) became the first woman and the oldest Jehovah's Witness to be sentenced to imprisonment when Abakan City Court handed her a two-year prison term under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participating in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity").

The court sentenced her son, Roman Lyubomirovich Baranovsky (born 27 June 1974), at the same trial to a six-year prison term under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organising the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity"). He and his mother were taken into custody directly from the courtroom.

Prosecutors had requested sentences of eight years' imprisonment for Baranovsky and five years for his mother.

According to the jw-russia.org website's record of the trial, prosecutors claimed that "Baranovskaya took the decision to participate in the collective profession and dissemination of the Christian faith of Jehovah's Witnesses, namely: to holding worship services, acquainting people with the Holy Scriptures and biblical teachings, and the principles and norms of this religion". Their case was based on covert recordings made over a period of 18 months – Jehovah's Witnesses insist that there was nothing "extremist" in any of the Baranovskys' conversations or acts of worship.

They appealed unsuccessfully at the Supreme Court of the Khakasiya Republic on 24 May 2021. At present, both are in detention in Abakan awaiting transportation to the prison camps in which they will serve their sentences (locations currently unknown). They will "of course" be challenging their convictions at the cassational level, their lawyer Yegiazar Chernikov told Forum 18 on 26 May.

Forum 18 wrote to the Khakasiya Republic Prosecutor's Office before the start of the working day of 27 May, asking why prosecutors had requested prison sentences, why the imprisonment of a 70-year-old woman with health problems was deemed necessary, why collective prayer and Bible reading were considered criminal offences, and who had been harmed by the Baranovskys' activities. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day in Abakan of 7 June.

In response to the same questions, the Chair of Abakan City Court Natalya Sunchugasheva told Forum 18 that the Judge had evaluated the evidence and that it is not the role of the chair of the court to verify the legality and validity of judges' decisions. She pointed out that this can only be done by a higher court and the Supreme Court of the Republic of Khakasiya had left the lower court decision unchanged. She did not address Forum 18's other questions.

Neither of the Baranovskys were detained or placed under house arrest during the investigation or trial – they will therefore be imprisoned for their full terms (minus about four and half months to account for their time in detention between conviction and appeal).

After their release, they will be subject to restrictions on freedom – Valentina for six months, Roman for 18 months – including a ban on leaving their home town and an obligation to report to probation authorities at specified intervals. Neither was added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" during the investigation.

Baranovskaya's medical conditions pose "a threat to her life and health"

Just before court proceedings began in July 2020, Baranovskaya – already in poor health which Jehovah's Witnesses think has been exacerbated by the stress of prosecution – suffered a stroke and was hospitalised.

"It is difficult to explain the inhuman attitude towards those who in our society are usually treated as vulnerable and in need of help, all the more so since they know that Valentina Ivanovna has had a stroke, and the regime of being in prison [could] provoke a recurrence of this crisis," lawyer Yegiazar Chernikov commented to Forum 18 on 25 May.

Chernikov explained that the case materials included a doctor's opinion that Baranovskaya's medical conditions pose "a threat to her life and health". He argued that the government Decree on Medical Examination of Those Suspected of or Charged with Committing Crimes of 14 January 2011 does not allow individuals with conditions such as Baranovskaya's to be held in detention.

"In her state of health Valentina may not return home, and may never see her son again," Chernikov said. "The court provided no explanation for why it considered that this woman necessarily poses a threat to society and therefore needs to be isolated from it. Such a decision is devoid of all sympathy and compassion."

Final speeches

"I am sure that any sane person understands that this campaign of persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses is senseless and cruel," Valentina Baranovskaya said in her final speech to the court on 8 February. "After all, who is being persecuted? Not only young and middle-aged men, but also the elderly, disabled, cancer patients, women over 70 and even 80 years old."

Baranovskaya complained that special forces troops of the FSB and the National Guard "rush into flats and houses, breaking open doors with a crowbar and sawing them out with a chainsaw, as well as breaking windows".

"But I have no reason to be afraid or ashamed of this persecution, as if I had committed some kind of crime. My conscience is clear before God and before people .. And I am deeply convinced that the entire judicial investigation proved only that the worship meetings imputed to me are exclusively peaceful, legal, non-dangerous religious activities that have not been prohibited by any court."

Baranovskaya stated that she thought it "necessary to oppose those who really do encourage violence and aggression", but "why persecute Jehovah's Witnesses who, at the cost of their lives and freedom, do not take up arms?"

Roman Baranovsky noted in his final speech on 11 February that he was merely being accused of professing his faith, "because it is the actions of professing faith, according to the prosecution, that confirm my unlawful activities, namely: hymns glorifying God, collective prayers, and discussion of the Bible in my house with my friends and acquaintances .. Is this really possible? How can this undermine the constitutional order of our country?"

The Baranovskys' current prison address is:

655017, Respublika Khakasiya

g. Abakan

kv. Molodyozhniy 22B

FKU Sledstvenniy izolyator No. 1 UFSIN Rossii po Respublike Khakasiya

They are likely to be moved in the near future to begin serving their terms in general-regime prison camps. It is as yet unknown where they will be sent.

Five more Abakan Jehovah's Witnesses under investigation

Five more Jehovah's Witnesses from Abakan are under investigation under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2, in a criminal case which was separated from the Baranovskys' in April 2020:

- Matryona Georgiyevna Spiriadi (born 4 November 1953) and Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Vergunov (born 16 November 1997) have been charged;

- and Aleksey Alekseyevich Baykalov (born 17 May 1995), Pyotr Mikhailovich Bozykov (born 28 January 1971), and Roman Vasilyevich Ostapenko (born 27 December 1986) have been named as suspects.

A sixth accused, Irina Vladimirovna Sidorova (born 3 March 1976), died in hospital on 17 July 2020 after an operation.

Krasnodar Region: Longest sentence yet

On 10 February 2021, Abinsk District Court in the Krasnodar Region issued the longest prison term yet imposed on a Jehovah's Witness for continuing to meet for worship. Aleksandr Yevgenyevich Ivshin (born 21 August 1957) was sentenced to seven years and six months in a labour camp (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2637) under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of the activities of a banned extremist organisation"). Prosecutors had requested an 8-year term. Ivshin appealed unsuccessfully at Krasnodar Regional Court on 15 April 2021.

"It is difficult to comment [on why the court issued such a harsh sentence]", Ivshin's lawyer Anton Bogdanov told Forum 18 on 25 May. "Even a 5,000 Rouble fine would still be unlawful and unjust, since the person was peacefully professing their faith. Why seven and a half years? Possibly to intimidate other Jehovah's Witnesses. An announcement about Ivshin went out on the Rossiya [television] channel together with an item about searches of Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow."

Legal Bible ordered destroyed

The court also ordered that a Bible seized from Ivshin's home should be destroyed. This was "The Bible: Contemporary Translations

of Biblical Texts", published in Minsk in 1993.

The court ordered the destruction despite a 2015 amendment to the Extremism Law which prohibits banning the Bible, the Koran, the Tanakh, and the Kanjur (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2126) as "extremist".

Anton Lopatin, Senior Assistant to the Krasnodar Regional Prosecutor, claimed to Forum 18 on 3 June that the "so-called 'Contemporary Translation'" Bible seized from Ivshin's home had been declared "extremist" and banned from distribution.

As of 7 June, no version of the Bible appears on the Justice Ministry's Federal List of Extremist Materials apart from the Jehovah's Witnesses' New World edition, which was banned as "extremist" in 2017 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2319). It is unclear whether Lopatin's claim and the court's destruction order is a case of misidentification.

It is not yet known whether the Bible destruction has been carried out, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Yaroslav Sivulsky told Forum 18 on 24 May.

"The level of public danger is severe"?

Forum 18 also asked Krasnodar Region Prosecutor's Office on 26 May why prosecutors had requested such a long jail sentence, why the imprisonment of Ivshin - a 63-year-old man with health problems - was deemed necessary, why collective prayer and Bible reading were considered criminal offences, and who had been harmed by his activities.

Senior Assistant to the Prosecutor Lopatin stated that, in sentencing Ivshin to seven and half years, the court had taken into account his age, chronic illnesses, positive character references, and lack of a criminal record. He also claimed that "the fact that the crime committed by Ivshin was directed against state authority, [and] the security of the state, and, by the level of public danger, is severe".

Because Ivshin spent the nearly 10 months of the investigation and trial under travel restrictions, and was not detained or placed under house arrest, he will have to serve almost the entirety of his lengthy sentence. This will be reduced by just over three months to account for his time in detention between conviction and appeal, Ivshin's lawyer Anton Bogdanov explained to Forum 18 on 25 May.

After his release – likely to be in summer 2028 – Ivshin will be subject to a further year of restrictions on freedom, and a five-year ban on leading or participating in public organisations. Investigators did not add his name to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists".

Ivshin was taken directly into custody from the courtroom and has since been moved between seven different detention centres before and after his appeal – one in Novorossiysk in his home region of Krasnodar; one each in Rostov-on-Don, Volgograd, and Saratov; two in Samara Region; and, most recently, one in Ryazan. It remains unknown where he will be sent to serve his sentence.

Infected with coronavirus

During his many transfers, Ivshin contracted Covid-19 and became seriously ill, the jw-russia.org website stated on 13 April 2021. The infection left him very weak and damaged his sense of smell. Many detainees are put in danger of contracting Covid-19 in the overcrowded detention conditions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571).

Investigators accused Ivshin of organising religious meetings in Abinsk, during which participants discussed the Bible and sang together, including via videolink with fellow Jehovah's Witnesses in a neighbouring town, according to the jw-russia.org website's record of the trial.

Abinsk District Court recently convicted two other Jehovah's Witnesses from Ivshin's home village of Kholmskaya. The court found Oleg Ivanovich Danilov (born 22 April 1974) and Aleksandr Anatolyevich Shcherbina (born 11 March 1976) guilty on 30 March and 6 April 2021 respectively. It sentenced both to three years' imprisonment under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2.

Criminal cases against other Kholmskaya Jehovah's Witnesses

Since March 2021, Investigators have also opened criminal cases against a number of other Kholmskaya Jehovah's Witnesses:

- Anna Vladimirovna Yermak (born 13 September 1982) – charged under Article 282.2, Part 1;
- Aleksandr Georgievich Nikolayev (born 26 August 1973) – charged under Article 282.2, Part 2;
- Olga Vladimirovna Ponomaryova (born 29 December 1974) – charged under Part 1.1;
- and Vasily Vladimirovich Meleshko (born 30 January 1961) – under investigation under Article 282.2, Part 2.

Abinsk's Jehovah's Witness congregation (the nearest to Kholmskaya) was among the eight local Jehovah's Witness religious organisations liquidated and outlawed well in advance of the Supreme Court's 2017 ruling. Krasnodar Regional Court declared it an "extremist organisation" on 4 March 2015 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2095) and banned its activities.

No Jehovah's Witnesses in the area were prosecuted, however, until after the Supreme Court's nationwide ban came into force. According to federal tax records, Ivshin, Danilov, and Shcherbina were not founder members (uchrediteli) of the Abinsk local religious organisation.

Ivshin's current prison address is:

390013, Ryazanskaya oblast

g. Ryazan

Pervomaysky prospekt 27b

FKU Sledstvenniy izolyator No. 1 UFSIN Rossii po Ryazanskoy oblasti

It is unknown where he will be sent to serve his sentence.

Novosibirsk Region: Pre-trial detention "unlawful"

Yury Prokopyevich Savelyov (born 1 January 1954) was the oldest Jehovah's Witness to receive a prison term when Novosibirsk's Lenin District Court sentenced him to six years on 16 December 2020 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2623) under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. He appealed unsuccessfully at Novosibirsk Regional Court on 5 April 2021, and on 28 May was transferred to a prison camp in the Altay Region to serve his sentence.

Prosecutors had requested a sentence of eight years' imprisonment. Forum 18 wrote to the Novosibirsk Region Prosecutor's Office before the start of the working day of 27 May, asking why prosecutors had requested such a long prison sentence, why the imprisonment of a 67-year-old man with health problems was deemed necessary, why collective prayer and Bible reading were considered criminal offences, and who had been harmed by Savelyov's activities. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day in Novosibirsk of 7 June.

Investigators had Savelyov kept in detention for nearly 29 months between his arrest in November 2018 and his appeal, despite his age and ill health and, latterly, the danger of contracting Covid-19 in the overcrowded conditions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571) of his Novosibirsk detention centre. Courts repeatedly refused appeals to have him placed under house arrest or lesser restrictions, despite the danger of contracting Covid-19 in overcrowded detention conditions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571).

On 10 March 2021, the 8th Cassational Court in Kemerovo eventually ruled that Savelyov's detention between 22 October 2019 and the date of his conviction had been unlawful. Savelyov will not automatically be compensated for this, but will have to apply to a court, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Yaroslav Sivulsky explained to Forum 18 on 25 May. The level of such compensation for "moral injury" is left to the discretion of the court.

Given his long period in detention, Savelyov should be released in September 2023. He will then be subject to one year of restrictions on freedom. Investigators had his name added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" on 18 December 2018.

Despite suffering a decline in his health during his time in detention, including gastrointestinal problems and the loss of two teeth, Savelyov is now "much better", according to Sivulsky. "It's possible to say that he is relatively well."

After the Supreme Court ban on Jehovah's Witness activity came into force, Savelyov "did not stop adhering to Jehovah's Witness beliefs [and] reading the Bible and discussing it with fellow believers and other people", Jehovah's Witnesses commented on 16 December 2020. "Investigators considered this 'extremism'."

The prosecution case for Savelyov's "extremism" was primarily built on the testimony of a secret witness, according to Jehovah's Witnesses. This witness failed to appear at any hearings, despite multiple opportunities.

Although the judge issued a warning to prosecutors over the procedural violations and delays to the trial that this caused, she also permitted the witness' testimony to be read out in court and accepted it as evidence. This violated Savelyov's right to a fair trial, his lawyers argued, as it did not allow them to cross-examine the secret witness themselves.

In his final speech to the court, Savelyov noted that the indictment itself indicated that there were no victims of his alleged offence and no damages caused by his actions. "But I want to say that there are indeed victims. Firstly, myself. For more than two years I have been in prison, I have lost my health, lost my property, my reputation has suffered, and now I bear the shameful stigma of 'criminal'."

Savelyov added that his relatives and friends also suffered. "It was a shock for them when they learned that I was accused of 'extremism'. And extremism is, among other things, a violent change to the constitutional system of Russia, or calls for this. But in eighteen volumes of the criminal case, there is not a word about violence."

Savelyov insisted that he had ended up accused "not of crimes, but of being a follower of the religious teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses".

Savelyov's prison address is:

658209, Altaysky kray

g. Rubtsovsk

ul. Traktornaya 23

FKU Ispravitelnaya koloniya No. 5 UFSIN Rossii po Altayskomu krayu

(END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia
(<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>)

For more background see Forum 18's survey of the general state of freedom of religion and belief in Russia
(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246), as well as Forum 18's survey of the dramatic decline in this freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis
<https://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation
(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1468)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments
(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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