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RUSSIA: Putin signs sharing beliefs, "extremism", punishments

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

President Putin has signed amendments imposing harsh restrictions on sharing beliefs, including where and who may share them, and increased "extremism" punishments, introduced with alleged "anti-terrorism" changes. There are widespread Russian protests against the suddenly-introduced changes, and may be a Constitutional Court challenge.

Russia's President Vladimir Putin has signed into law legislation on so-called "missionary activity", further restricting the public expression of freedom of religion and belief, including in the media and online, Forum 18 notes. The amendment - which has been rapidly introduced - caused widespread protests, but was signed on 6 July and the signing was made public at Moscow lunchtime on 7 July. It was published on the presidential website that day and comes into force on 20 July.

Lawyers working to protect the right to freedom of religion and belief are already preparing for an appeal to the Constitutional Court. At the same time, they are preparing advice to individuals and religious communities on how to abide by the terms of the Law. One Protestant leader, though, has warned that some of the restrictions "a good Christian cannot fulfil" (see below).

Against international human rights obligations, the amendments to the Religion Law restrict those who can share beliefs to people with permission from members of state-registered religious groups and organisations. This excludes people from groups which have chosen to operate without state permission, such as certain Baptist congregations. The amendments also bar even informal sharing of beliefs, for example responding to questions or comments, by individuals acting on their own behalf (see below).

The amendments also restrict the beliefs that can be shared, specifies a restricted list of places where beliefs may be shared, and explicitly bans any beliefs from being shared in residential buildings, or on another association's property without permission. An allegedly "anti-terrorist" part of the amendments bars the conversion of residential property to religious use (see below).

There are now heavy financial penalties of up to 50,000 Roubles for individuals and up to 1 million Roubles for organisations who violate the amendments. A fine of 50,000 Roubles (about 6,500 Norwegian Kroner, 700 Euros, or 780 US Dollars) represents about six weeks' average wages for those in work. Maximum fines for organisations would be up to 20 times as much.

Another part of the package of laws sharply increases Criminal Code Article 282.2 punishments for those convicted of allegedly "extremist" activity, who are often Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims who study the works of theologian Said Nursi. These punishments were last increased in February 2014 (see below).

Putin signs despite protests

Parliament's upper chamber approved the bill on 29 June 2016 and sent it to President Putin to sign into law. He signed despite widespread protests, including many pointing out that the amendments violate the Constitution and international human rights obligations.

Mikhail Fedotov, Chair of the Presidential Council on Civil Society Development and Human Rights, protested directly to Putin on 1 July, arguing that Human Rights Council recommendations on other parts of the package had not been taken into consideration, and that the amendments "create unjustified and excessive restrictions on the freedom of conscience of believers of all religions, and encroach upon the fundamental constitutional principle of non-interference by the state in the internal arrangements of religious associations" (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

Past attempts

Until now the current Religion Law (originally passed in 1997) contained no definition of or explicit limitations on sharing beliefs publicly, though some regions did impose local laws restricting sharing beliefs. It is likely that these will either have to be withdrawn or adapted to bring them into line with new amendments (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

Also affecting the sharing of religious ideas, a widely-opposed and vaguely-worded law criminalising "offending religious feelings" (not blasphemy as often described) came into force on 1 July 2012. But few if any prosecutions followed, though critics noted that the amendments to the Criminal Code and Code of Administrative Offences were so poorly defined that they could be used by anyone to prosecute actions they simply dislike (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

The current amendment restricting sharing beliefs was proposed between 13 and 20 June 2016 by Duma Deputy Igor Zotov, who has not answered Forum 18's questions on why he introduced the amendment. Similar earlier 2016 bills apparently did not have government support. Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko stated on 5 February and 18 May that sufficient regulation of the dissemination of beliefs was already in place and that the proposed legislation would violate citizens' constitutional right to freedom to disseminate their beliefs. For unexplained reasons the government changed its view (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

The current amendment restricting sharing beliefs introduces an entire new section to the Religion Law, and was added to United Russia deputy Irina Yarovaya and Senator Viktor Ozerov's repressive package of proposed laws allegedly on public security and anti-terrorism measures in mid-June (see <http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/23/draconian-law-rammed-through-russian-parliament>). "An anti-terrorism package is almost certainly one that will pass," SOVA Center for Information and Analysis Director Aleksandr Verkhovsky commented to Forum 18 from Moscow on 22 June. So adding the sharing belief restrictions to such a package was "a clever move" (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

In line with international human rights obligations?

Forum 18 also contacted the Duma's Legal and Linguistic Analysis Department on 23 June to ask:

- whether the Department thinks the proposed amendment is in line with Russia's Constitution and international human rights obligations, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) human dimension commitments;

- and why the amendment was included in a law to counter terrorism and ensure public safety when "national security" is not a permissible reason in international human rights law to restrict freedom of religion and belief.

However, on hearing Forum 18 introduce itself, Department Head Andrei Dubrovsky immediately put the phone down (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

The content of the amendments, such as the ban on sharing beliefs in residential premises, directly contravenes Russia's international human rights obligations (see the outline of these in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)/Council of Europe Venice Commission Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief <http://www.osce.org/odihr/13993>). Russia is a participating State in the OSCE and a member of the Venice Commission.

"A black day on the calendar"

President Putin's signing of the amendments into law brought widespread condemnation in Russia. "Today is indeed a black day on the calendar," lawyer Vladimir Ryakhovsky of the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice wrote on his Facebook page on 7 July. "Hope was that Vladimir Putin would not in the end sign this law. A law which openly contradicts the gospel command 'go and make disciples' and, in addition, violates the constitutional rights of citizens." He complained that the amendments been drafted by "people who were absolutely not professionals and who didn't understand religious practice".

Ryakhovsky noted that now the Law has been adopted and until any amendments can be made or any appeal lodged to the Constitutional Court, "we have to live by it". "Let's work out how to get round it, and then we'll seek to get it amended. Don't succumb to panic when they threaten you with all kinds of horror stories." He said that he and his colleagues at the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice in Moscow will hold a seminar on 19 July – to be streamed online – giving advice on the new Law.

Deputy Bishop Konstantin Bendas of the Pentecostal Union said he hoped that deputies in the Duma to be elected in September will wish to amend what has been adopted. He highlighted what he sees as the need to change the provisions on "missionary activity" and the use of homes for meetings for worship.

"The state's refusal over many years to assign land to Protestant communities to build churches has forced us to acquire or build buildings designated as residential," Bendas complained to REF news agency on 7 July, "and hold our services and charitable ministries in them." The acquisition and retention of property for meetings for worship and similar purposes has long been a problem for many belief communities of all faiths (see eg. F18News 16 December 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2024).

Bendas stressed that Protestants regard home churches as an integral part of their activity. "The new Law takes no account of this practice."

Deputy Bishop Bendas noted harassment of a community in a town near Moscow before the Law was adopted. "The local police officer came to a home where a group of Pentecostals meet each Sunday," he noted. "With a contented expression he told them: 'Now they're adopting the Law I'll drive you all out of here.' I reckon we should now fear such 'zealous enforcement'."

Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses – who often do not have their own permanent buildings – are the main belief communities fined or threatened with fines for organising or conducting meetings for worship which have not been specifically approved by the local authorities (see eg. F18News 2 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2044).

Bendas said the Pentecostal Union is preparing instructions and recommendations for its congregations on the provisions of the new Law. "I reckon there will also be a section 'demands of the Law which a good Christian cannot fulfil'," he added.

The three-day Uraza Bayram (Eid al-fitr) festival, that marks the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, started this year in Russia on the evening of 5 July. This meant that Forum 18 was unable to gain immediate comment on the new Law from a number of Muslim organisations.

"We are distressed by the Law and see it as repressive for believers in our country, because the Law contradicts the Bible", a spokeswoman for the Council of Churches - Baptists told Forum 18 from Moscow on 8 July. She added that it is difficult to say precisely how Baptists' activities will be affected, but "we must assume there will be repression and persecution". When Forum 18 asked about the impact on activities in residential premises, she replied that Baptists would continue to gather, but that when the Law is put into practice, "then we will have a problem".

Constitutional Court appeal?

It is too early to appeal to the Constitutional Court, Hare Krishna lawyer Mikhail Frolov told Forum 18 on 8 July, "as the Law is not yet in force and has not yet violated anyone's rights".

"It is important to understand where law enforcement practice will go. If it leans towards limiting the rights of individual citizens to disseminate their religious beliefs, then an appeal to the Constitutional Court is inevitable. The main question is: will representatives of religious communities be unable to preach?"

Verkhovsky of the SOVA Center pointed out to Forum 18 on 8 July that at the moment, before the Law comes into force, there is practically nothing which can be done to challenge it, "unless one-third of Duma deputies in the new session [in September] appeal to the Constitutional Court, but that will be impossible". He added, "It is very difficult to predict the dynamics of [the Law's] application. If and when it is seriously applied, then there will be consequences".

In addition to Duma deputies and officials, Article 96 of the Constitutional Court Law allows "individual and collective complaints against the violation of the constitutional rights and freedoms" from individuals".

Lutheran Bishop Konstantin Andreyev, who is also a lawyer at the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, said on 7 July that his telephone had been "white with heat" with a huge number of calls about the new Law. He wrote on his Facebook page that it was "foreseeable" that the new Law would be adopted, adding that he understood people's "anger, disappointment and frustration".

"We are beginning to prepare for the Constitutional Court," Andreyev noted, "and, at the same time, to draw up procedures and recommendations for religious organisations as to how to live under the new Law."

The amendments "violate my rights as a citizen of Russia"

Even before President Putin signed the amendments into law, they provoked widespread protests, from belief communities and human rights defenders. "The entry into force of this law would mean that the Russian political system has shifted ever further towards a totalitarian regime," Hare Krishna lawyer Mikhail Frolov told Forum 18 on 24 June (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

As well as those who have publicly protested, Forum 18 is aware of other belief communities seriously alarmed by the amendment. However, they do not wish to make any public comment as they fear the possible consequences of publicising their opposition (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

Some belief communities - such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees, some Muslims, Baptists and various other Protestants - may be particularly vulnerable to prosecution. This is because public sharing of their beliefs is either a specific religious obligation, or seen as a key part of their faith (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

Many belief communities of all faiths and human rights defenders made similar criticisms to those of Mukaddas Bibarsov, Co-chair

of the Council of Muftis and head of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Volga Region "Spreading faith is a statutory objective of almost every religious association, organisations and groups alike," he noted, "as well as a way to practice their religion for believers, who until recently had a constitutional right to share their creed with others, be publicly baptised, read prayers, offer literature, and just talk heart to heart." He added that "it remains unclear what the legislators want to achieve" (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

The Baptist Council of Churches published an open letter of protest to President Putin, reminding him that the government itself refused to support earlier attempts to restrict sharing beliefs. It also complained that legislators responsible for the bill did not seek the views of competent experts or the opinions of believers, "who are the most affected by the new amendments", and that the bill violates Russian citizens' constitutional right "freely to choose, hold, and disseminate religious and other beliefs" (Article 28) to all other citizens, regardless of whether or not they belong to the same or any religious association" (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

Igor Yanshin, a lawyer and member of a Pentecostal church in Siberia, set up a change.org petition in an attempt to persuade the President to halt the bill. After 25,000 people had signed it in the first three days, he sent it to Putin on 29 June via the Kremlin website. The petition remains active and reached 37,000 signatures by the evening of 4 July in Moscow. "I decided to collect signatures, aware that the proposed amendments violate my rights as a citizen of Russia," Yanshin told Forum 18 on 30 June (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

Nearly 40,000 people had signed Yanshin's petition as of lunchtime in Moscow on 8 July. Another change.org petition calling on the amendments to be revoked – focusing on surveillance over electronic communications – had gathered nearly 370,000 signatures by the same time.

Forum 18 notes that the amendments exert a chilling effect on even the most informal manifestation of freedom of religion and belief. As Yanshin noted in his petition: "Travelling by train and want to tell a neighbour about God? Forget it! After all, you do not have/have forgotten/have not received the relevant documents, and you could spend the rest of the trip in the nearest police station. Want to repost a beautiful picture with a quote from a preacher on VKontakte? Think twice! Double-check the validity of the authorising document! Sent a message to a friend with an invitation to a service? Wait for the police to visit!" (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

What is sharing beliefs - and what beliefs?

The new Chapter 24 of the Religion Law states: "For the purposes of this federal law, missionary activity is recognised as the activity of a religious association, aimed at disseminating information about its beliefs among people who are not participants (members, followers) in that religious association, with the purpose of involving these people as participants (members, followers). It is carried out directly by religious associations or by citizens and/or legal entities authorised by them, publicly, with the help of the media, the internet or other lawful means."

Lawyer Yanshin argues in his change.org petition that this definition means that "now any conversation about God with a non-believer is missionary activity and subject to regulation".

The definition appears to exclude the possibility of punishment for promoting atheist views, since, as Verkhovsky of the SOVA Center pointed out to Forum 18 on 4 July, atheists have no "religious association" in which to involve other people (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

However, the expression of atheist views and criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church has led to prosecution under existing articles of both the Criminal and Administrative Codes, Forum 18 notes. An atheist blogger is currently on trial in Stavropol for making disparaging comments about Christianity (see F18News 29 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2193). Also, a video associated with the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church was declared "extremist" in 2014 for its critical view of the Moscow Patriarchate (see F18News 3 December 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2020).

Limited places beliefs can be shared in

The amendment also specifies that sharing beliefs may be carried out "without hindrance" only in the following places:

- in religious premises, buildings and structures, as well as on land on which such buildings and structures are located;
- in buildings and structures belonging to religious organisations or provided to them in order to carry out their statutory activities, as well as on land on which such buildings and structures are located;
- in premises belonging to religious organisations or provided to them in order to carry out their statutory activities, as well as on land on which the buildings containing the relevant premises are located, by agreement with the owners of such buildings;

- in premises, buildings, and structures and on land owned by or provided to institutions established by religious organisations;
- on land owned by or provided to religious organisations;
- in places of pilgrimage;
- cemeteries and crematoria;
- in the premises of educational institutions historically used for religious ceremonies.

Specific bans on sharing beliefs in some places

As well as limiting the places where sharing beliefs can happen, the amendment also explicitly bans sharing beliefs in some places.

- Residential buildings

Sharing beliefs is not permitted in residential buildings, "except as provided for by Article 16, Part 2 of [the Religion Law]". Article 16, Part 2, states that worship services and other religious rites and ceremonies may be freely held in residential premises, as well as in premises owned or rented by religious organisations. It is therefore unclear what this part of the amendment will mean in practice.

"I fear even the authors of the Law don't understand this," Yanshin remarked to Forum 18 from Nizhnevartovsk on 1 July. Sharing beliefs door-to-door would appear to be banned by the amendment, but it is unclear how far other forms of sharing beliefs in residential buildings will be affected.

Bishop Bendas of the Union of Evangelical Christians suggested on 24 June that residential premises owned or rented by a religious organisation would be exempted. But he pointed out that "We follow the common biblical practice of house churches, in which parishioners not only come to church on Sundays, but gather in each other's flats or houses during the week, when small services may be held, to which may be invited, among others, even people who are not members of the church. By my reckoning, in Moscow alone more than a thousand of these house churches gather every week."

As Yanshin indicated to Forum 18, while religious services are legally permitted in residential buildings, the presence of non-believers or members of other faiths may lead such events to be considered "missionary activity" (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

- "Anti-terrorism" ban on religious buildings

A corresponding amendment to the federal Housing Code in the same "anti-terrorism" package prevents the conversion of residential premises to non-residential use for the purposes of religious activity (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195). However, in international human rights law "national security" or related grounds such as terrorism are not permissible grounds to restrict freedom of religion and belief (see the OSCE/Venice Commission Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief <http://www.osce.org/odihr/13993>).

- Not on another association's property

Sharing beliefs is also not permitted on the property of another religious association without written permission.

What beliefs can be shared?

The amendment also contains a list of aims which sharing beliefs is not permitted to pursue. Some are general, such as "the violation of public safety and public order", which may be broadly applied across activities and religious associations. Loose interpretation of "public safety" violations by police and prosecutors is already apparent in cases brought against religious believers under the Administrative Code's Article 20.2 ("Violation of the established procedure for organising or conducting a gathering, meeting, demonstration, procession or picket") (see F18News 18 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2179).

Other prohibited aims are more specific, including "the encouragement of suicide or the refusal on religious grounds of medical assistance to persons in a life- or health-endangering condition" and "the motivation of citizens to refuse to fulfil their civic duties as established by law and to commit other illegal acts" (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

These accusations have been made against Jehovah's Witness communities in suits to have them liquidated as "extremist" (alongside more specific allegations of distribution of "extremist" literature), based on their refusal of blood transfusions and conscientious objection to military service (see eg. F18News 24 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2181).

Other communities may also be affected. The Theravada Buddhist community has failed in an appeal against an order to remove from a Buddhist website a verse of the Theravada Pali Canon giving an allegedly "detailed description of suicide" (see F18News 5 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2174).

Who can share beliefs?

- Only those with state permission from state-permitted groups

If acting on behalf of a religious group, individuals sharing belief must carry with them a document indicating that they have been granted authorisation by a general meeting of the group. The authorisation must also show that the group has "registered", ie. notified the appropriate federal organ of its creation and the commencement of its activities (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

Such notification is a requirement introduced by a 2015 change to the Religion Law, required all religious communities that do not have legal status to notify the authorities of their existence and activity. This includes names and addresses of all their members and addresses where any meeting takes place. Previously, an unregistered community was legally able to operate as a religious group, without informing the state or registration (see F18News 17 September 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2101).

The 2015 change - like the sharing beliefs restrictions - directly contravenes Russia's human rights obligation not to require state permission for the exercise of the freedom of religion and belief (see the OSCE/Council of Europe Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities <http://www.osce.org/odihr/139046>).

- Only some without written authorisation

Under the sharing beliefs amendments, sharing beliefs on behalf of a religious organisation may be freely carried out by its director, members of its governing body, and its clergy. Other individuals must carry with them a document from the organisation's governing body granting them the authority to share beliefs in its name. This document must also contain details of the organisation's state registration and entry in the Unified State Register of Legal Entities.

The Law stresses that religious associations (both organisations and groups) bear full responsibility for sharing beliefs carried out in their name by individuals whom they have approved (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

- Not groups without state permission

These regulations restrict the dissemination of beliefs in public to registered groups and organisations. Religious communities which have chosen on principle not to register, which include large numbers of Baptist churches across the country, will therefore by definition be breaking the Law should they engage in any action outside their own places of worship aimed at informing others of their faith. Baptists have already faced prosecution under Administrative Code Article 20.2 ("Violation of the established procedure for organising or conducting a gathering, meeting, demonstration, procession or picket") for holding prayer services in courtyards, and distributing literature from "mobile libraries" without notifying the authorities (see F18News 18 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2179).

Protestant leaders have described the requirement to carry authorising documents "not only absurd and insulting, but also .. the basis for mass persecution of believers for the violation of such provisions" (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

- Foreigners and stateless persons only with state permission

Foreign citizens (and stateless persons) may share beliefs only in the regions or other federal subjects in which the religious group or organisation they are representing is registered to operate (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

- Not allegedly "extremist organisations"

The Law also states that sharing beliefs may not be carried out on behalf of organisations which have been liquidated by court order or whose activities have been blocked or banned on grounds of "extremism" or terrorism. Since such organisations are legally no longer in existence and therefore unable to authorise individuals to share beliefs as required by the amendment, it is unclear why this stipulation is necessary. It may nevertheless cause problems for some individuals.

Several Jehovah's Witness congregations and one Muslim community have been dissolved because of alleged "extremist" activity. If prosecutors proceed with their threat to liquidate the Jehovah's Witness headquarters near St Petersburg, thousands of local congregations across Russia could also face prohibition of their activities and individuals could be vulnerable to criminal charges for

expressing their beliefs (see F18News 24 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2181).

Such cases are usually based on earlier convictions of the organisations or their members for distributing literature deemed to be "extremist". Jehovah's Witnesses have been keen to stress that such liquidations do not mean a ban on Jehovah's Witness activity in the areas where these communities were based. However, police and prosecutors may now be able to use the new restrictions on sharing beliefs against former members who continue to do so (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

- Not individuals acting on their own or informally

By confining sharing beliefs to authorised representatives of registered groups and organisations, the amendment also effectively outlaws the sharing of beliefs by individuals purely on their own initiative, or who informally respond to the questions or comments of others (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

Punishments

Individual citizens who violate any of these restrictions and requirements will be liable to a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 Roubles. For organisations (legal entities), the fine stands at 100,000 to 1 million Roubles. Religious groups, while they may share beliefs in limited circumstances if registered (see above), are not legal entities - their members would therefore be subject to prosecution as individuals.

Foreigners may be fined 30,000 to 50,000 Roubles with the possibility of expulsion from Russia (see F18News 4 July 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2195).

Heavier penalties for "extremism" crimes

The package of laws also includes amendments to the Criminal Code which will increase punishments for offences under Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity") and 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").

Article 282.2 is often used to convict Muslims who read Said Nursi's works (see eg. F18News 29 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2193) and Jehovah's Witnesses (see eg. F18News 3 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2128) for exercising freedom of religion and belief.

Punishments under Article 282.2 were last increased in February 2014, having previously been raised in 2011 (see F18News 11 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1927). Like the changes to the Religion Law, the Article 282.2 changes also come into force on 20 July 2016.

The new penalties are:

Part 1 ("Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity"): a fine of 400,000 to 800,000 Roubles or 2 to 4 years' income; or 6 to 10 years' imprisonment with a ban on working in one's profession of up to 10 years and restrictions on freedom for 1 to 2 years.

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"): a fine of 300,000 to 600,000 Roubles or 2 to 3 years' income; or assigned work for 1 to 4 years with a ban on working in one's profession for up to 3 years or with restrictions on freedom for up to 1 year; or 2 to 6 years' imprisonment with a ban on working in one's profession for up to 5 years or with restrictions on freedom for up to 1 year.

The previous penalties from February 2014 were:

Part 1: a fine of 300,000 to 500,000 Roubles or 2 to 3 years' income; or assigned work for up to 5 years, with or without restrictions on freedom for up to 2 years; or 2 to 8 years' imprisonment, with or without a ban on holding certain positions or engaging in certain activities for up to 10 years or without it and with or without restrictions on freedom for up to 2 years.

Part 2: a fine of up to 300,000 Roubles or up to 2 years' income; assigned work for up to 3 years with or without restrictions on freedom for up to one year; or imprisonment for up to 4 years, with or without a ban on holding certain positions or engaging in certain activities for up to 5 years and with or without restrictions on freedom for up to one year. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of freedom of religion or belief in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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