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The right to believe, to worship and witness
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27 April 2018

RUSSIA: Another "extremism"-related criminal trial imminent?

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

The criminal trial in Krasnoyarsk Region of a fourth local Muslim accused of "extremism" for meeting with others to study the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi appears imminent. Other criminal trials on similar charges of Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims continue.

The criminal trial appears imminent of a further Muslim from Krasnoyarsk Region charged with "continuing the activities of an extremist organisation" for meeting to study the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Forum 18 has found. Among the three Muslims already on trial in Krasnoyarsk on the same criminal charges is a Muslim whose previously unknown trial began in January.

The latest case brings to six the total number of people known to be on trial or soon to come to court for alleged involvement in "Nurdzhular", which Muslims in Russia deny even exists. Two Jehovah's Witnesses are also on trial for "extremism"-related offences (see below).

Criminal cases were opened in April against a further seven Jehovah's Witnesses for allegedly continuing to meet after the nationwide ban on Jehovah's Witness activity came into force in July 2017. The authorities staged armed raids on the homes of pacifist Jehovah's Witnesses in four regions, some officials holding guns in individuals' faces. Up to four people in custody and a fifth under travel restrictions face criminal investigations of organising or participating in a banned organisation (see F18News 23 April 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372).

If convicted under Criminal Code Article 282.2, both Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims who read Nursi's works could be jailed for up to 10 years under Part 1 ("Organisation of the activities of a banned extremist organisation") or up to six years under Part 2 ("Participation in the activities of a banned extremist organisation") (see Forum 18's Russia "extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215).

Typically, Muslims who study Nursi's writings meet in private homes, with one or more expounding on a particular book. They also pray, eat, and drink tea together. They do not seek any state permission for such meetings.

State agencies interpret such meetings as organised activity by "Nurdzhular" (derived from the Turkish for "Nursi followers"), which was ruled "extremist" and prohibited by the Supreme Court in 2008, despite the fact that Muslims in Russia say that no such association even exists.

Courts have banned many Russian translations of Nursi's books, despite their not calling for violence or the violation of human rights (see Forum 18's Russia "extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215).

Subsequently, people who have met to study Nursi's books have been prosecuted under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ("Organisation of" or "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").

Since the 2017 liquidation of the Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre as an "extremist" organisation, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia are now also in danger of being prosecuted under Criminal Code Article 282.2 if they continue to meet for worship or Bible study. In some towns, this was already a danger after earlier "extremism" bans on local communities (see Forum 18's Russia "extremism" religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215).

Punishments

Amendments to the Criminal Code in July 2016 introduced harsher penalties for "extremism"-related offences (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

An individual charged since then (such as the two Muslims recently charged in Krasnoyarsk Region) could be sentenced to the

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following under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ("Organisation of" or "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"):

Part 1 – a fine of 400,000 to 800,000 Roubles (or two to four years' salary); or six to 10 years' imprisonment followed by restrictions on pursuing certain jobs and activities for up to 10 years and restrictions on freedom for one to two years;

Part 2 – a fine of 300,000 to 600,000 Roubles (or two to three years' salary); compulsory labour for one to four years with possible restrictions on pursuing certain jobs and activities for two to six years; or two to six years' imprisonment followed by restrictions on pursuing certain jobs and activities for up to five years or restrictions on freedom for up to a year.

A fine of 300,000 Roubles (42,000 Norwegian Kroner, 4,350 Euros or 5,300 US Dollars) is about eight months' average wages for those in formal work.

For any defendant whose alleged offence took place before 20 July 2016, earlier provisions remain in place, with fines of 300,000 to 500,000 Roubles, compulsory labour of up to five years or prison sentences of two to eight years under Part 1, and fines of up to 300,000 Roubles, compulsory labour of up to three years, or prison sentences of up to four years under Part 2 (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

Krasnoyarsk: Further trial begins

Two further Muslims in Krasnoyarsk Region, Sabirzhon Shamsidinovich Kabirzoda (born 4 May 1991) and Yevgeny Igoryevich Sukharev (born 9 April 1990), are facing prosecution 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").

Kabirzoda and Sukharev are friends of two other Muslims who are already on trial in Krasnoyarsk for alleged involvement in "Nurdzhular" (see F18News 1 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2358). Kabirzoda and Sukharev, however, are being tried separately having been charged much later, a fellow Muslim who is following the case told Forum 18 on 20 April.

Tajik-born Kabirzoda, who appears to work as a plasterer in Krasnoyarsk, is already on trial at the city's Soviet District Court, where prosecutors lodged his case on 22 December 2017. By this time, he had already been a suspect since December 2016 in the case against two other Muslims who read Nursi's works, Andrei Dedkov and Andrei Rekst (see below).

This investigation was carried out by Krasnoyarsk Region FSB security service, which has repeatedly failed to respond to Forum 18's questions about the case.

Kabirzoda has undergone nine hearings so far before Judge Marina Shtruba, with the next due on 14 May, according to the court website. He is not in custody or under house arrest, a fellow Muslim told Forum 18 on 26 April, and may not be under travel restrictions, "just an obligation to attend court".

Kabirzoda was added on 20 November 2017 to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

Sharypovo: Trial imminent?

The trial appears imminent of Yevgeny Sukharev, from the Krasnoyarsk Region town of Sharypovo. He is also accused of involvement in the "Nurdzhular cell" allegedly run by Andrei Dedkov.

After an investigation by the Krasnoyarsk Region branch of the Investigative Committee, Sukharev was charged on 12 February 2018 and his case lodged at Sharypovo City Court on 27 March 2018. No date has yet been set for his first hearing before Judge Inga Gavritskaya.

Sukharev is currently under travel restrictions. He does not yet appear on the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

In the Investigative Committee document officially charging Sukharev, seen by Forum 18, he is described as having been a "follower" of Said Nursi since October 2012. From July 2014 to March 2015, the document continues, Sukharev went to Turkey to study Nursi's teachings. He is accused of bringing banned books and brochures into Russia on his return.

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The document also outlines various gatherings at Sukharev's or his friends' homes in Sharypovo and Krasnoyarsk. At these meetings, Sukharev is accused of quoting from Nursi's writings, "applying knowledge and skills he acquired by studying the Risale-i Nur collection, using this literature as a single set of propaganda, influencing the religious feelings of those present with the goal of a step-by-step transformation of their personalities and change in their worldview in accordance with the ideology of [Nurdzhular], pursuing a goal of Islamisation of the population and creation of an Islamic state".

Investigators name Andrei Rekst and Sabirzhon Kabirzoda as having been present at a "lesson" at which Sukharev quoted from Risale-i Nur. They refer to Andrei Dedkov only as "a person against whom separate criminal proceedings are underway", who organised the cell of which Sukharev was allegedly a part.

According to the charges, the FSB security service raided Sukharev's rented flat in Sharypovo on 24 March 2017, "and on that same day Sukharev's criminal activity in Krasnoyarsk Region was thwarted". Officers seized several volumes from the Risale-i Nur collection (mainly single copies, Forum 18 notes, with a few duplicates) as well as Mary Weld's "Islam in Modern Turkey", a biography of Nursi which has also been banned in Russia as "extremist".

Krasnoyarsk: Trials of Muslims continue into second year

Andrei Nikolayevich Dedkov (born 16 June 1979), the alleged leader of the Krasnoyarsk "Nurdzhular cell", has now been on trial at Soviet District Court in Krasnoyarsk for just over a year (see F18News 1 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2358). There have been 19 hearings in his case so far before Judge Sergei Tupeko, the latest on 17 April 2018. He is under travel restrictions, having been released from nearly one year's pre-trial detention in March 2017.

Dedkov's next hearing is due on 3 May, according to the court website.

New raid for "evidence"

On 18 April, state drug control officers searched Dedkov's home and those of three other Krasnoyarsk Muslims for narcotics, a fellow Muslim who reads Nursi's works told Forum 18 the following day. The officers found nothing, but took all four men to the Drug Control Service's headquarters and questioned them, before letting them go.

"A special interest was shown in the messaging apps the Muslims used," their fellow Muslim added, and their phones were confiscated for further examination.

Repeated prosecutions

This is the third time Dedkov has been prosecuted for allegedly organising "Nurdzhular" activities. The first case against him ran out of time in 2012. The second ended in conviction in 2015, but the consequent fine was dropped after the statute of limitations again expired during the appeal period (see F18News 21 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2141).

Andrei Gennadyevich Rekst (born 14 March 1994), who is at home on bail, will next appear before Judge Radomir Larionov at Krasnoyarsk's Sverdlovsk District Court on 4 May. He has also had 19 hearings over the last year, the most recent on 26 April.

Dedkov and Rekst were initially detained in March 2016, after the FSB security service had carried out surveillance of several Muslims in Krasnoyarsk for much of 2015 (see F18News 29 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2193). For holding gatherings to read and discuss Nursi's works, Dedkov was charged under Criminal Code 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 Rekst was charged 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").

Both Rekst and Dedkov appear on the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

More books banned

Prosecutors have also succeeded in having religious literature seized from Rekst's flat prohibited as "extremist". Judge Natalya Bogdevich of Sverdlovsk District Court upheld the prosecutors' suit on 28 March.

If the ruling comes into force, these particular editions of Russian translations of Said Nursi's books will be banned from distribution in Russia. The texts are: "Admonition of the soul", "Tract on the wonders of the Koran", "Mesnevi Nuriye", and "The path of

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positive service&quot. All are taken from the Risale-i Nur collection of Nursi's writings and have been translated from Turkish and published by Sözler. Sözler, which published Nursi's works in Russian before they were banned as "extremist" material, has accused state agencies of falsifying witness testimony used in two criminal cases which resulted in the jailing of two Muslim prisoners of conscience. It has appealed to the General Prosecutor's Office to investigate (see F18News 11 December 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2340).

Forty titles by Nursi are already on the Justice Ministry's Federal List of Extremist Materials (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

Sergei Mikhailov, representing the Sözler publishing company, told Forum 18 on 19 April that he is preparing an appeal against the ban on the latest Nursi works to Krasnoyarsk Regional Court.

Novosibirsk: Trial of Muslim, investigation of another continue

The trial of Imam Komil Olimovich Odilov (born 18 August 1975) is continuing at Novosibirsk's October District Court. He has undergone seven hearings so far (see F18News 1 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2358). The next hearing is due on 3 May, according to the court website. The court has still not questioned Odilov, his lawyer, Yuliya Zhemchugova, told Forum 18 on 19 April.

Prosecutors have charged Odilov under Criminal Code 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"). He is alleged to have organised a "cell" of "Nurdzhular" in Novosibirsk. He denies the charges and insists that the alleged organisation does not exist and that he has never engaged in "extremist" activity (see F18News 1 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2358).

Odilov was among nine people detained by the FSB at an Azerbaijani cafe in Novosibirsk in December 2015 (see F18News 21 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2141). Most were released the next day after interrogation and searches of their homes, but Odilov was kept in custody for nine months before being allowed home under travel restrictions in September 2016 (see F18News 1 February 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2251).

Odilov has since January 2016 been on the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

Odilov's is the only one among six related prosecutions to have come to trial so far.

Prosecutors have closed the criminal cases against three of Odilov's fellow suspects – Uralbek Karaguzinov (born 21 July 1954), Mirsultan Takhir-ogly Nasirov (born 8 October 1997), and Bobirjon Baratovich Tukhtamurodov (born 9 July 1975) – under Criminal Code Article 76.2, which permits the "release from criminal liability" of people who have committed a minor or moderate-severity first offence upon payment of a judicial fine.

"A deceit" to "prove" banned organisation exists

Karaguzinov and Nasirov were fined in November 2017 in circumstances that a fellow Muslim who has been following the case described to Forum 18 as "a deceit", which may have negative consequences for the other people targeted in the same investigation. Having agreed to accept a judicial fine rather than a trial, he explained, Karaguzinov and Nasirov then had to plead guilty to the charges of involvement in a banned "extremist" organisation – "that is, they recognised the existence of the organisation [Nurdzhular] ..thus, [investigators] received 'evidence' of Odilov's guilt as the 'organiser'" (see F18News 8 December 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2339). Karaguzinov and Nasirov have since been removed from the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists".

Muslims who have been following the cases have insisted to Forum 18 that the discretionary psychiatric examinations investigators are allowed to order are being used to pressure the defendants in the case (see F18News 1 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2358).

Tukhtamurodov's prosecution ended on 7 March 2018, also by order of October District Court. He has temporary refugee status in Russia, having fled from his home country of Uzbekistan (see F18News 8 December 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2339) Yet despite the end of Tukhtamurodov's prosecution, as of 27 April his name remains on the Rosfinmonitoring list.

More investigations

The FSB security service in Novosibirsk is also investigating Imam Ilhom Zavkidinovich Merazhov (born 1 July 1970) under

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Criminal Code 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 Timur Muzafarovich Atadzhanov (born 21 April 1988) 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"). Merazhov is currently living abroad. Atadzhanov's whereabouts are unknown.

This is the second time that Odilov and Merazhov have been prosecuted under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. In May 2013 they each received one-year suspended sentences for allegedly organising "Nurdzhular" activity in Novosibirsk, a verdict Merazhov described at the time as "nonsense" (see F18News 18 June 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1848). Both men with other Muslim readers of Nursi's works in February 2014 appealed against convictions (Application No. 6738/14) to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (ECtHR) (see F18News 10 April 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1946). As of April 2018 no decision has yet been made on the admissibility of their cases.

In December 2015 Odilov and Merazhov were among nine people detained by the FSB security service at an Azerbaijani cafe in Novosibirsk (see F18News 21 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2141). Most were released the next day after interrogation and searches of their homes, but Odilov was kept in custody for nine months before being allowed home under travel restrictions in September 2016.

The Novosibirsk FSB, which was responsible for the investigation, has repeatedly refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the case.

Dagestan: Trial of Muslim continues

The trial of Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev (born 16 February 1977) is continuing at Izberbash City Court in Dagestan. He has had eight hearings so far, the latest on 11 April. The next hearing is due on 7 May.

He has not been added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

Prosecutors have charged Aliyev under Criminal Code 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") for holding gatherings of fellow Muslims to study Nursi's works (see F18News 1 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2358).

Aliyev is being held in Investigation Prison No. 2 in Derbent, a fellow Muslim told Forum 18, and is taken from there to Izberbash on each day of the trial(see F18News 1 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2358).

FSB security service agents arrested Aliyev in an armed raid on the night of 19-20 April 2017 (see F18News 12 May 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2279). He has since been held in pre-trial detention as the FSB investigation proceeded. Apart from confirming on 30 May 2017 that a criminal investigation of Aliyev was underway, the Dagestan FSB has refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the case.

Aliyev, an Azerbaijani-born Russian citizen, "does not dispute that he read some books", according to his lawyer Magomedrasul Zapirov, "but he denies that he worked against Russia" (see F18News 1 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2358).

Oryol: Trial of Jehovah's Witness continues

The trial of Danish Jehovah's Witness Dennis Ole Christensen (born 18 December 1972) began at Oryol's Railway District Court on 26 February. There have been five hearings so far, the latest on 25 April. Judge Aleksei Rudnev has scheduled further hearings on 14, 15, 16, 28, 29, and 30 May.

The registered Jehovah's Witness organisation in Oryol was ruled "extremist" and ordered liquidated in June 2016 (see F18News 15 February 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2256). Christensen's prosecution is derived from this local ban, and not the nationwide prohibition on Jehovah's Witness activities, which came into force in July 2017, after the case against him was initiated (see F18News 18 July 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297).

Prosecutors accuse Christensen of "continuing the activities" of the banned and liquidated Oryol Jehovah's Witness community, and have charged him under Criminal Code 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") (see F18News 20 February 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2355).

Jehovah's Witnesses maintain that the ban on their activities (nationwide from July 2017, in several towns beforehand as a result of local liquidations) does not amount to a prohibition of their faith, and that they retain the right under the Russian Constitution to pray together.

Christensen's lawyer Viktor Zhenkov told the court on 23 April that the defence intends to seek clarification as to "what should be considered the consequences of liquidation of a legal entity, and what is the inviolable human right to freedom of religion".

The case materials come to 2,500 pages, according to Jehovah's Witnesses. Court proceedings have been twice adjourned (on 26 February and 3 April) to allow Christensen more time to familiarise himself with the evidence against him (previously, Oryol's Soviet District Court had limited him to two weeks).

Prosecutors complained at the 3 April hearing that asking for more time was "an intentional drawing out of proceedings", Jehovah's Witnesses stated on 9 April. Judge Rudnev, however, agreed to the defence request and granted Christensen six more meetings with his translator. The judge refused, however, to allow the defence team to view the prosecution's material evidence (video recordings, photographs, and items seized in searches).

As the trial proceeds, Christensen remains in custody at Investigation Prison No. 1 in Oryol. On 22 February, Judge Rudnev extended his detention period to 1 August 2018. Danish Embassy officials, who have been in contact with Christensen, state that he is in good health and has not been mistreated in the prison.

On 27 March, Christensen was added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists". This means that his bank accounts have been frozen and no transactions worth more than 10,000 Roubles per month are allowed (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

When Judge Rudnev asked Christensen on 23 April if he understood the accusations against him, Christensen responded that he understood only partially, since the charge was "formulated so broadly", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 24 April.

Lawyer Anton Bogdanov pointed out that the indictment "does not contain the essence of the charge, or a description of the places and times of the commission of the alleged criminal actions or of methods, consequences, or other significant circumstances, without which it is impossible to issue a judicial decision".

On 24 April, the court began questioning witnesses. This will be followed by the questioning of Christensen himself, then the final arguments from prosecution and defence, Jehovah's Witnesses explained.

Police and FSB security service officials arrested Christensen at a Bible study meeting on 25 May 2017. Video footage posted online by local news site Orlovskiye Novosti shows armed personnel in body armour and balaclavas, accompanied by others in civilian clothes, entering a Kingdom Hall. The congregation inside was prevented from leaving while officers searched the building. Interrogations and searches of people's homes continued into the following morning, Jehovah's Witnesses stated (see F18News 22 June 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2290).

Oryol: Another criminal investigation underway

Oryol Region Investigative Committee is also investigating a second Jehovah's Witness in Oryol, Sergei Skrynnikov, on suspicion of breaking 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").

According to a 20 February Investigative Committee statement, Skrynnikov is accused of attending a Jehovah's Witness meeting at which he made "a public speech containing propaganda of the banned organisation" (see F18News 20 February 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2355).

This case also appears to be derived from Oryol Regional Court's 2016 ban on the local Jehovah's Witness community, rather than the nationwide liquidation, as the alleged offence took place on 26 February 2017, according to the Investigative Committee. Skrynnikov's home was among seven searched during May 2017 raids which led to the arrest and detention of Dennis Christensen.

Prokhladny: Trial of Jehovah's Witness continues

A 70-year-old Jehovah's Witness elder, Arkadya Akopovich Akopyan, has so far undergone 16 hearings in his trial at Prokhladny City Court in the North Caucasus region of Kabardino-Balkariya, according to court records. The latest of these took place on 15 March, when Judge Oleg Golovashko ordered further "expert analysis".

Akopyan has been charged under Criminal Code Article 282, Part 1 ("Actions directed at the incitement of hatred [nenavist] or enmity [vrazhda], as well as the humiliation of an individual or group of persons on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, attitude to religion, or social group") (see F18News 20 February 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2355).

Prosecutors accuse Akopyan of giving sermons which "degraded the dignity" of Orthodox and Muslim clergy, condoning Pussy Riot's demonstration in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow in 2012, and giving banned "extremist" literature to his community.

The case against Akopyan is based on the testimony of five witnesses who are not member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, but who claim to have attended meetings at which they heard the allegedly extremist sermons and were given banned texts to distribute. This is despite the fact that their mobile phone records show that they were nowhere near the Jehovah' Witnesses' building at the times in question, defence lawyers have claimed.

"Expert" Irina Balova, who analysed the statements allegedly made by Akopyan, gave evidence at hearings on 14 and 15 March, Jehovah's Witnesses stated on 20 March. Judge Golovashko found shortcomings in this testimony, including the fact that Balova had ignored the absence of a punctuation mark which could give a sentence an entirely different meaning. At the request of defence lawyers, he decided to appoint a new expert for a fresh psycho-linguistic examination.

If convicted, Akopyan may receive the following possible punishments: a fine of 300,000 to 500,000 Roubles; or 2 to 3 years' income; or compulsory labour (prinutdelnaya rabota) for 1 to 4 years with a ban on working in one's profession for up to 3 years; or 2 to 5 years' imprisonment.

Akopyan remains under travel restrictions, but has not been placed on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" as of 27 April. (END)

For more background see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of freedom of religion and belief in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2246, and of the dramatic decline in this freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215.

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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