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RUSSIA: Further raids, arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses

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

State agencies launched multiple armed raids on Jehovah's Witnesses' homes in four further regions. Long interrogations followed, including of an 83-year-old woman. Courts put another five people in pre-trial custody as they face criminal investigation. Twelve Jehovah's Witnesses are now behind bars, with at least 30 facing criminal cases.

Russia's crackdown on Jehovah's Witnesses across the country is gathering pace. State agencies launched multiple armed raids in another four regions in the space of a week in late May and early June, followed by lengthy interrogations and detentions. Courts have put another five people in pre-trial custody.

The latest five arrests bring the total number of Jehovah's Witnesses known to be behind bars to 12 (see full list at bottom of article).

Investigators have opened criminal cases against at least 30 people. It is unknown when any of them will appear in court. If eventually tried, they could face up to between six and 10 years' imprisonment (see below).

The late May/early June raids in Tomsk, Khabarovsk, Magadan, and Naberezhnyye Chelny (Republic of Tatarstan) followed a now-familiar pattern: officials from a variety of agencies, including armed men in masks and body armour, arrive at Jehovah's Witnesses' homes usually late at night or early in the morning. The occupants are sometimes made to lie on the floor or face the wall while the officers search their flats and houses. Officers then confiscate a similar range of possessions – electronic devices, bank cards, personal photographs, and books – and take the Jehovah's Witnesses, including children and the elderly, to a police station or Investigative Committee office for questioning. Interrogations can last several hours, after which most people are released (some under travel restrictions). Others are kept in temporary detention until investigators decide whether to apply to a court for longer-term restrictive measures – they must do this within 48 hours of the initial detention.

These followed similar earlier raids across Orenburg Region and in the cities of Birobidzhan (Jewish Autonomous Region) and Perm in May (see F18News 25 May 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2381), and in Ufa (Republic of Bashkortostan), Polyarny (Murmansk Region), Shuya (Ivanovo Region), and Vladivostok in April (see F18News 23 April 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372).

The wave of searches and arrests began in Belgorod and Kemerovo in January and February (see F18News 20 February 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2355).

Officials know that using troops and weapons including machine guns on raids is unnecessary, as Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide are a doctrinally pacifist community, whose young male members worldwide will not do compulsory military service or any other military-connected activity. Even before Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in Russia in 2017, however, their communities were frequently raided by heavily armed and camouflaged officials who frequently planted "evidence" (see eg. F18News 24 October 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2228).

Forum 18 was mostly unable to find out the conditions of the prisoners, including whether they have access to religious literature. The Investigation Prison in Ivanovo, where Dmitry Mikhailov (see below) is detained, twice put the phone down when Forum 18 asked about his conditions. Dennis Christensen, who is being held in Oryol's Investigation Prison during his trial (see below), is allowed access to a Bible, a prison official claimed to Forum 18 on 6 June.

Many Russian-language Jehovah's Witness publications, including their New World Bible, have been banned and placed on the Justice Ministry's Federal List of Extremist Materials (see F18News 29 September 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2319). Prisoners in any case would not be able to have access to these publications.

Tomsk: Armed raids, searches, interrogations, detention

In the Siberian city of Tomsk, 48-year-old Sergei Klimov was held in temporary detention for 48 hours after a raid on his home on 3 June. A court was expected to decide on further restrictive measures no later than 5 June, Jehovah's Witnesses stated on 4 June. It

remains unknown if Klimov is now in pre-trial detention or is under any other restrictions.

Officials, including armed officers, carried out multiple searches of Jehovah's Witnesses' homes and cars in Tomsk on the morning of 3 June. During the raids, officers refused to show the court authorisation for their seizures of Bibles, phones, and other personal possessions, Jehovah's Witnesses claim. They took about 30 people away for questioning at a police "anti-extremism" centre, among them an 83-year-old woman.

Jehovah's Witnesses state that the interrogations lasted until 2 am the next day, and at least one person fell ill and had to be taken to hospital by ambulance.

According to a 4 June statement by the Tomsk Regional Investigative Committee, investigators have opened a criminal case 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"), based on information from the police and the FSB security service.

Investigators allege that Klimov (whom they do not name) and other Tomsk residents organised "meetings at which they studied materials from the international website of the Jehovah's Witnesses, which has been banned in Russia and added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials, and carried out preaching activity aimed at involving citizens in an organisation which has been liquidated as extremist by a decision of the Supreme Court". The investigation is ongoing, the statement concludes.

Klimov is not among the founding members of Tomsk's former Jehovah's Witness community, according to federal tax records.

Magadan: Armed raids, searches, detentions

Konstantin Petrov (aged 31), Yevgeny Zyablov (aged 41), and Sergei Yerkin (aged 65) were all detained on 30 May after FSB officers, accompanied by armed and masked operatives, searched their homes and confiscated electronic devices, bank cards, and books.

After questioning, investigators placed the men in a temporary detention centre for 48 hours. It is unknown what longer-term restrictions Magadan City Court may have imposed (which should have happened no later than 1 June).

According to federal tax records, Magadan had no registered Jehovah's Witness congregation before the liquidation of the Administrative Centre in St Petersburg.

Khabarovsk: Search, detention

State agents also detained 39-year-old Ivan Puyda in the evening of 30 May after a search of his flat. The authorities were able to hold him for up to 48 hours before needing to go to court should they wish to extend the period of detention or request house arrest. What restrictions, if any, he is now under remains unclear.

Puyda's detention appears to be connected to the case in Magadan, Jehovah's Witnesses stated on 1 June, as the search of his property was approved by Magadan City Court, despite Khabarovsk being nearly a thousand miles away.

Puyda does not appear on the list of founding members of Khabarovsk's former Jehovah's Witness community, according to federal tax records.

Naberezhnyye Chelny, Tatarstan: Armed raids, searches, detentions

Four people are in pre-trial detention after state agencies launched armed raids on 10 homes in Naberezhnyye Chelny on the night of 27 May. Searches and interrogations lasted "deep into the night", Jehovah's Witnesses said on 30 May. Officers seized electronic devices, mobile phones, and passports.

Ilham Karimov (aged 37), Vladimir Myakushin (aged 30), and Konstantin Matrashov (aged 29) were all initially detained on 27 May. On 29 May, judges at Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court upheld investigators' request to place them in pre-trial custody until 25 July. All three men have lodged appeals against their detention, according to the court website.

Investigators detained 24-year-old Aydar Yulmetyev on 29 May. Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court agreed to his being held in pre-trial custody on 31 May, also until 25 July.

According to court records, all four men are still classed as suspects – that is, they have not yet been formally charged. Investigators have opened criminal cases against all four under both 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 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"). Investigators appear to be undecided which Part of the Article applies.

The four men's prison address is unknown.

Shuya, Ivanovo Region: Pre-trial detention

Since 3 June, Dmitry Mikhailov has been in pre-trial detention, having been placed under investigation under Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing of extremist activity"), in addition to 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"). Shuya City Court ruled that Mikhailov should be kept in custody until 29 July.

Mikhailov had previously been under travel restrictions after a raid on his home on 20 April (see F18News 25 May 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2381).

The special department of Ivanovo's Investigation Prison No. 1, where Mikhailov is being held, put the phone down twice on 6 June as soon as Forum 18 had asked about Mikhailov's conditions and if he is allowed access to religious literature.

Mikhailov's prison address is:

Ivanovo Region

153025 Ivanovo

ulitsa Bolotnaya 2

Investigation Prison No. 1

Oryol: Second criminal case, travel restrictions

Oryol Region Investigative Committee has charged a second Jehovah's Witness in Oryol with continuing the activities of the city's banned Jehovah's Witness community.

On 20 February, investigators opened a case against 55-year-old Sergei Skrynnikov 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"). Investigators placed Skrynnikov under travel restrictions (see F18News 27 April 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2373).

On 8 May, investigators issued formal charges against Skrynnikov. They searched his home again, but found nothing illegal, Jehovah's Witnesses said on 6 June.

"Direct consequence" of Supreme Court ban

Jehovah's Witnesses note that the latest arrests are a "direct consequence" of the Supreme Court decision which ordered their Administrative Centre in St Petersburg to be liquidated as an "extremist" organisation, and banned Jehovah's Witness activities across Russia. The ruling was issued on 20 April 2017 and entered legal force on 17 July 2017 (see F18News 18 July 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297).

Despite this prohibition, Jehovah's Witnesses insist that they retain the right to practise their faith.

"During the hearing in the Supreme Court, Justice Ministry representatives repeatedly stated that the court decision would not affect ordinary believers in any way. It would only concern legal entities", Yaroslav Sivulsky of the Jehovah's Witnesses stated on 4 June. "But what do we see in reality? Article 28 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which guarantees the freedom of conscience and religion, is being violated, the rules of international law are being violated."

Penalties

None of the people involved in the latest prosecution yet appears on the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze. Their names may be added while their cases are still ongoing, however, meaning that they will suffer financial restrictions without any trial or conviction (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

Officials added the name of Danish Jehovah's Witness Dennis Ole Christensen to the List on 27 March, shortly after his trial began (see below).

If convicted, the Jehovah's Witnesses charged or under investigation could be imprisoned for up to 10 years 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"), or up to six years 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"). They may alternatively receive large fines.

Some people are also under investigation under Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing of extremist activity"). Offences under this article also incur large fines or prison terms of up to eight years.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses – Dennis Ole Christensen in Oryol and Arkadya Akopovich Akopyan in Kabardino-Balkariya – are already on trial for extremism-related offences not directly related to the nationwide ban on Jehovah's Witness activity (see F18News 27 April 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2373).

Christensen 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") for allegedly continuing the activities of the Oryol Jehovah's Witness community. This was ruled "extremist" and ordered liquidated in June 2016. Christensen has so far undergone 15 hearings at the city's Railway District Court, most recently on 6 June.

Prosecutors accuse Akopyan of giving sermons which "degraded the dignity" of Orthodox and Muslim clergy. His trial on charges of "incitement of hatred" (Criminal Code Article 282, Part 1) resumed on 15 May after repeat "expert analysis" of his alleged statements. The latest hearing was on 5 June.

Muslims also targeted

Prosecutors have also frequently brought extremism-related charges against Muslims who meet to read the works of late Turkish theologian Said Nursi. People who meet to study his writings can be accused of continuing the activities of "Nurdzhular", which the Supreme Court banned as an "extremist organisation" in 2008, even though Muslims in Russia deny it has ever existed (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215).

Four Muslims were jailed for alleged involvement in "Nurdzhular" in 2017 (see F18News 8 December 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2339).

Another Muslim received an eight-year prison sentence in Dagestan on 28 May 2018 and verdicts are expected in other trials in Krasnoyarsk and Novosibirsk later in June (see F18News 8 June 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2386).

There are currently five Muslims known to be on trial for having met to study Nursi's books (see F18News 27 April 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2373).

Jailed or restricted Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses currently known to be in pre-trial detention, under house arrest, and under travel restrictions:

Detention

- Shuya, Ivanovo Region

1) Dmitry Vasilyevich Mikhailov, born 25 October 1977 – until 29 July 2018

- Naberezhnyye Chelny, Tatarstan Republic

2) Ilham Shamilyevich Karimov, born 9 February 1981 – until 25 July 2018

3) Vladimir Nikolayevich Myakushin, born 8 November 1987 – until 25 July 2018

4) Konstantin Viktorovich Matrashov, born 22 August 1988 – until 25 July 2018

5) Aydar Maratovich Yulmetyev, born 10 August 1993 – until 25 July 2018

- Orenburg

6) Vladimir Yuryevich Kochnyov, aged 38 – until 14 July 2018

7) Aleksandr Gennadyevich Suворov, aged 38 – until 14 July 2018

- Ufa, Bashkortostan Republic

8) Anatoly Sergeyevich Vilitkevich, born 15 September 1986 – extended on 1 June; unknown for how long, but by law cannot be later than 2 October at this stage (6 months from opening of case)

- Polyarny, Murmansk Region

9) Roman Nikolayevich Markin, born 18 March 1974 – until 12 June 2018

10) Viktor Fyodorovich Trofimov, born 26 March 1957 – until 12 June 2018

- Vladivostok, Primorye Region

11) Valentin Pavlovich Osadchuk, born 15 March 1976 – until 20 June 2018

- Oryol

12) Dennis Ole Christensen, born 18 December 1972 – until 1 August 2018 (currently on trial)

House arrest

- Orenburg

Vladislav Sergeyevich Kolbanov, born 1992

- Perm

Aleksandr Vasilyevich Solovyov, aged 48

Travel restrictions

- Orenburg Region

At least six people – probably including Boris Andreyev and Anatoly Vichkitov

- Vladivostok, Primorye Region

Two women, names unknown, aged 66 and 83

- Belgorod

Anatoly Shalyapin

Sergei Voykov

- Oryol

Sergei Vladimirovich Skrynnikov, born 30 October 1962

Unknown restrictions

- Birobidzhan, Jewish Autonomous Region

Alam A.o. Aliyev, aged 55

- Tomsk

Sergei Klimov, aged 48

- Magadan

Konstantin Petrov, aged 31

Yevgeny Zyablov, aged 41

Sergei Yerkin, aged 65

- Khabarovsk

Ivan Puyda, aged 39

(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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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY