

19 November 2021

RUSSIA: "Prior conspiracy" leads to eight-year jail terms

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

Courts have jailed four Jehovah's Witnesses for eight years each so far in 2021 for exercising freedom of religion or belief, one in Blagoveshchensk and three in Astrakhan, equalling the term a Dagestan court handed to Muslim Ilgar Aliyev in 2018. Courts gave other Jehovah's Witnesses shorter jail terms. In Astrakhan, the judge cited as an aggravating circumstance "the commission of a crime as part of a group of persons, by prior conspiracy". Astrakhan Region Prosecutor's Office did not reply as to why prosecutors requested such long jail sentences, and why meeting for prayer and Bible reading should be treated as a criminal offence.

On 25 October, an Astrakhan court handed four Jehovah's Witnesses some of the longest prison terms yet given in Russia for exercising the right to freedom of religion and belief. Three men were each sentenced to eight years' imprisonment for allegedly "organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation", while a woman tried alongside them was sentenced to three years and six months under the lesser charge of "participation".

In June 2021, Jehovah's Witness Aleksey Berchuk in Blagoveshchensk was also given an eight-year jail term. In the same trial Dmitry Golik was sentenced to six years and two months' imprisonment (see below).

The four eight-year jail terms equal the eight-year jail term handed down to Ilgar Aliyev in Dagestan in May 2018. He was punished for meeting with others to pray and study the works of the late Muslim theologian Said Nursi.

In the Astrakhan trial, the judge handed Jehovah's Witnesses Rustam Diarov, Yevgeny Ivanov and Sergey Klikunov the eight-year terms under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 for 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". The judge cited as an aggravating circumstance "the commission of a crime as part of a group of persons, by prior conspiracy" (see below).

The prison term of three years and six months which the same judge handed to Olga Ivanova is the second-longest yet imposed under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 for "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". It is also the longest sentence yet received by a woman (see below).

All four Astrakhan Jehovah's Witnesses are currently in detention awaiting appeal. If their sentences enter legal force, they will also be subject to one year's restrictions on freedom after release from prison, and will be barred from holding positions in public organisations for three years (Ivanova) or five years (the others).

Forum 18 asked Astrakhan Region Prosecutor's Office why prosecutors had requested such long jail sentences, why meeting for prayer and Bible reading should be treated as a criminal offence, why the Ivanovs, Diarov, and Klikunov were considered dangerous, and who had been harmed by their activities. Forum 18 received no reply (see below).

Aleksey Berchuk and his fellow defendant in Blagoveshchensk Dmitry Golik have spent the two months since their unsuccessful appeal being transferred through multiple detention centres around the country. It is uncertain where they will serve the bulk of their sentences (see below).

Forum 18 asked Amur Region Prosecutor's Office why such long jail sentences were sought, why meeting for prayer and Bible reading should be treated as a criminal offence, why Berchuk and Golik were considered dangerous, and who had been harmed by their actions. Vitaly Chirey, head of the Prosecutor's Office's Criminal Justice Department, replied that "the decision on the type and extent of punishment lies exclusively within the competence of the court", and that the activities of members of an organisation liquidated as "extremist" "will be of an unlawful nature and subject to legal liability" (see below).

Charges and punishments

After being kept under FSB security service or police surveillance for some months, most targeted Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim

readers of Nursi's works are prosecuted for "organising" (Criminal Code (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215) 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 are similar. They include meeting in each other's homes to pray and sing together, study sacred texts, and to discuss shared beliefs. "There is no logic" to current sentencing patterns, Jehovah's Witness lawyers commented to Forum 18 on 29 October. At the same time, a trend appears to have been growing throughout 2021 towards jail sentences under Article 282.2, Part 2 (see below).

There is a wide range of compulsory and discretionary punishments – including post-imprisonment punishments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) - for convictions under Criminal Code Article 282.2. A similarly wide range of punishments exists for convictions under Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing extremist activity"), as well as under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation").

These punishments vary depending on the articles (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) under which a conviction takes place, and whether a sentence is a prison sentence, suspended prison sentence, fine, or assigned work sentence (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681). Such punishments include bans on holding certain positions and/or carrying out certain activities, restrictions on freedom, and administrative supervision (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681).

The state of "sudimost" (having an active criminal record, the state of being a convicted person) also brings with it formal penalties and informal obstacles to life (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681), as does being on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687).

Astrakhan: Equal longest sentences

In the southern city of Astrakhan, a local court handed four Jehovah's Witnesses some of the longest prison sentences yet imposed for exercising the right to freedom of religion and belief.

On 25 October, Judge Aleksey Syomin of Trusovsky District Court found Rustam Gennadyevich Diarov (born 13 August 1973), Yevgeny Borisovich Ivanov (born 15 December 1976), and Sergey Aleksandrovich Klikunov (born 20 May 1975) guilty under both Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 for "organising" a banned alleged "extremist" organisation, and Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing extremist activity"). He sentenced them to eight years' imprisonment in general-regime labour camps.

This equals the eight-year jail term (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2386) handed to Muslim reader of Nursi's works Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev in Dagestan in May 2018. He was punished for meeting with others to pray and study the works of the late Muslim theologian Said Nursi.

The Judge handed Olga Aleksandrovna Ivanova (born 19 December 1982) a prison term of three years and six months under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 for "participation" in a banned alleged "extremist" organisation, also to be spent in a general-regime labour camp.

The sentences are:

- 1) Rustam Gennadyevich Diarov (born 13 August 1973)
- 2) Yevgeny Borisovich Ivanov (born 15 December 1976)
- 3) Sergey Aleksandrovich Klikunov (born 20 May 1975)

Added to Rosfinmonitoring List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687): 2 July 2020

Punishments: 8 years' imprisonment + 5-year ban on holding official positions in public organisations after release (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) + 1 year's restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)

Appeal: lodged at Astrakhan Regional Court – hearing date unknown

Due for release from prison: unknown

Restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) due to end: 1 year after release

Sudimost and being on Rosfinmonitoring List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) due to end: 8 years after end of restrictions on freedom

4) Olga Aleksandrovna Ivanova (born 19 December 1982)

Added to Rosfinmonitoring List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687): 2 July 2020

Punishments: 3 years and 6 months' imprisonment + 3-year ban on holding official positions in public organisations after release (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) + 1 year's restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)

Appeal: lodged at Astrakhan Regional Court – hearing date unknown

Due for release from prison: unknown

Restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) due to end: 1 year after release

Sudimost and being on Rosfinmonitoring List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) due to end: 8 years after end of restrictions on freedom

The three men's eight-year term is the same as that handed to Aleksey Berchuk in June (see below). Ivanova's is the longest jail sentence yet handed to a woman, and the longest yet imposed on a Jehovah's Witness under Criminal Code Article 282.2 Part 2 alone for "participation" in a banned alleged "extremist" organisation. A court in Krasnodar Region handed down a longer term earlier in October, but under both Part 2 and Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation") – see below.

All four defendants have lodged appeals at Astrakhan Regional Court, according to the district court website, but it is unknown when these will be heard.

Diarov, Ivanov and Klikunov had spent one year, four and a half months in detention by the time their trial ended, and they remain in custody awaiting appeal. Should their convictions enter legal force, this time would be deducted from their sentences at a rate of one day in detention to one and half days in prison.

Ivanova spent the same period under house arrest, and this would be deducted at a rate of two days under house arrest to one day in prison. She was taken into custody from the courtroom after sentencing.

Judge Syomin also gave the three men a five-year ban, and Ivanova a three-year ban, on holding official positions in public organisations after their release. All four will also be under restrictions on freedom for one year, during which time they will be under a 10pm-6am curfew, a ban on leaving their home town, moving house, or changing job without permission, and a requirement to register regularly with probation authorities.

The men's record prison term resulted from separate punishments imposed under each of the charges against them, Jehovah's Witness lawyers explained to Forum 18 on 29 October.

The three men received 7 years under Article 282.2, Part 1 for "organising" a banned alleged "extremist" organisation, and 4 years under Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing extremist activity"), from which Judge Syomin derived an aggregate sentence of 8 years. The judge also noted as an aggravating circumstance "the commission of a crime as part of a group of persons, by prior conspiracy", which has also been cited in other Jehovah's Witness cases, the lawyers added.

"Being a Jehovah's Witness is not a crime!"

"Being a Jehovah's Witness is not a crime!", Olga Ivanova stated in her final speech to the court on 22 October. "Jehovah's Witnesses have lived in Russia for over 100 years, and for most of this time, they practiced their faith without the organisations which appeared in the late 1990s under the [Religion Law] and existed for under 20 years .. The presence or absence of religious legal organisations does not mean the prohibition of an entire religion and, moreover, does not provide grounds for the criminal prosecution of citizens for their beliefs."

Ivanova called the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses "senseless and cruel", "because not only are middle-aged men and women persecuted, but also the elderly, the disabled, cancer patients (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571) .. and even children. For what? Simply because people believe in God and want to worship him, [while] living peacefully."

Investigators had all four defendants added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists"

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687) on 2 July 2020. This "equated [them] with obvious criminals, murderers or militants", Ivanova noted in court. "This fact will affect our future employment, as well as any activities that require the use of a passport. All this causes serious emotional, moral, and material harm".

In his final speech, Ivanova's husband Yevgeny Ivanov told the court that as a believer he did not intend to break the law, but on the contrary, tried to act within the framework of the Constitution and other laws. "I acted under the guidance of Article 28 of the Constitution, professing my beliefs both individually and together with others – that is, with my fellow believers.

"From the materials of the case," Ivanov added, "it can be seen that the online meetings were held peacefully, no calls to undermine the foundations of the constitutional order were ever made, [and] conversations and discussions were conducted only in relation to strengthening faith in God [and] family relations, on the topic of exemplary behaviour in society, [and] on the topic of raising children in the spirit of God's direction."

Forum 18 wrote to the Astrakhan Region Prosecutor's Office on 27 October, asking why prosecutors had requested such long jail sentences, why meeting for prayer and Bible reading should be treated as a criminal offence, why the Ivanovs, Diarov, and Klikunov were considered dangerous, and who had been harmed by their activities. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day in Astrakhan of 19 November.

More raids in Astrakhan Region

On 9 November, security officers carried out more early-morning raids on Jehovah's Witness homes in the towns of Znamensk and Akhtubinsk, jw-russia.org stated on 11 November.

Investigators have had three men – Sergey Vasilyevich Korolyov (born 1973), 60-year-old Sergey Ivanovich Kosyanenko, and Rinat Ildusovich Kiramov (born 1987) – placed in detention for an initial period of two months.

Likelihood of imprisonment for "participation" in banned community increasing?

People charged with the lesser offence of "participation" in a banned Jehovah's Witness organisation appear to be increasingly likely to be given a jail sentence rather than a suspended sentence or fine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2667). Before 2021, no Jehovah's Witness and no Muslim who reads Nursi's works had been imprisoned under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 for "participation" in a banned alleged "extremist" organisation.

Two people technically sentenced to imprisonment before the start of 2021 were released as soon as their trial ended because they were considered to have already served the terms the judge imposed. Tatyana Viktorovna Shamsheva (born 7 June 1977) and Olga Sergeevna Silayeva (born 11 May 1988) received prison sentences of one year (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2619) on 3 September 2020, but had already spent 245 days in detention, taken as equivalent to 367 days in prison.)

On 24 February 2021, Valentina Ivanovna Baranovskaya (born 8 April 1951), from the Khakasiya Republic, received a two-year prison term (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2662). She was the first woman and the oldest Jehovah's Witness yet to be given a jail sentence.

Since Baranovskaya's conviction in February, courts have handed down jail terms to nine other Jehovah's Witnesses under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 for "participation" in a banned alleged "extremist" organisation. The most recent was Vladimir Yuryevich Skachidub (born 4 December 1961). Pavlovsky District Court (Krasnodar Region) handed him a prison sentence of 4 years and 2 months on 11 October 2021, but he had been tried under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation"), as well as Part 2.

Two of the nine jailed since Baranovskaya's conviction – Alevtina and Artyom Bagratyan – were freed in June as their sentences were deemed to have been completed.

Blagoveshchensk: Further long sentence

On 30 June 2021, Aleksey Aleksandrovich Berchuk (born 17 November 1975) became the first Jehovah's Witness to be sentenced to eight years' imprisonment. This equals the eight-year jail term (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2386) handed to Muslim reader of Nursi's works Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev in Dagestan in May 2018. He was punished for meeting with others to pray and study the works of the late Muslim theologian Said Nursi.

Berchuk was convicted at Blagoveshchensk City Court in the Far Eastern Amur Region, alongside Dmitry Mikhailovich Golik (born 26 March 1987), who was initially given a seven-year prison term, also among the longest sentences handed down to Jehovah's Witnesses.

The punishment was "rather unexpected", their lawyer Artur Ganin commented to Forum 18 on 4 November. He noted that neighbours and employers had given both men good character references and that they had spent the duration of the investigation and trial under travel restrictions only.

Kristina Golik told Forum 18 on 9 November that the first investigator had made her husband think that he would get a suspended sentence. "For the whole period of the investigation and hearings, we prepared ourselves emotionally and spiritually, because we knew we shouldn't expect an acquittal," she added.

"For a week before the verdict we saw that the judge's attitude was very serious. Then I began to prepare myself for a jail sentence. I thought that it would be a real prison term, but maybe three or four years. But in the end they gave him as much as the prosecutor requested: seven years. Of course, inside me everything clenched in pain, that we would be separated .. But seeing my husband's attitude, how he is determined to stay faithful to God, has given me strength."

Despite their convictions coming into force more than two months ago, it remains unknown where the two men will end up serving their sentences. After spending time in detention centres in Blagoveshchensk and Ussuriysk (over 1300km away in Primorye Region) while awaiting appeal, they have been transported around the country.

The prison service moved Berchuk between detention centres in Blagoveshchensk, Chita, Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk, Yekaterinburg, Saransk (Republic of Mordoviya), and Irkutsk again, and returned him to Yekaterinburg again by 11 November, according to jw-russia.org's record of the case.

The prison service moved Golik from Blagoveshchensk to Khabarovsk, then back to Blagoveshchensk to the city's Correctional Colony No. 8. It now appears, however, that it has transferred him to Khabarovsk again, according to his wife.

It is uncertain where the two men will serve the bulk of their sentences.

Multiple charges

Prosecutors charged Berchuk twice under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 for "organising" a banned alleged "extremist" organisation, accusing him of organising the activities of formerly registered local Jehovah's Witness organisations in both his home town of Blagoveshchensk and in Birobidzhan, capital of the neighbouring Jewish Autonomous Region. This is the first known instance of a Jehovah's Witness being simultaneously tried twice under the same Part of this Article, according to Jehovah's Witness lawyers.

Prosecutors charged Golik once under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 and once under Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation"). At the men's appeal at Amur Regional Court on 2 September 2021, the judge removed Golik's Part 1.1 charge.

Berchuk and Golik lodged a cassational appeal on 28 October 2021, which will be considered at the 9th Cassational Court in Vladivostok. It is unknown when this hearing will take place.

According to his lawyer Ganin, Berchuk's double charge arose from the fact that he visited Birobidzhan and gave lectures there on the Bible to fellow believers. Seventeen Jehovah's Witnesses in the Jewish Autonomous Region have also been convicted and given suspended sentences (all but one from Birobidzhan), while a further six are on trial.

According to the written verdict, seen by Forum 18, Judge Tatyana Studilko handed Berchuk the following sentences:

for "organising the activities" of the Blagoveshchensk community – 6 years and 6 months, plus one year of restrictions on freedom and a five-year ban on participation in and leadership of public organisations;

for "organising the activities" of the Birobidzhan community – 6 years and 5 months, plus one year of restrictions on freedom and a 4-and-a-half-year ban on participation in and leadership of public organisations.

Under Criminal Code Article 69, which governs aggregate sentencing, Judge Studilko ruled that Berchuk should serve 8 years in prison, followed by one year and 6 months of restrictions on freedom, and should be banned from participation in and leadership of public organisations for 5 years and 6 months.

In addition to being charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 for "organising" a banned alleged "extremist" organisation, Dmitry Golik was also accused under Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation") for attempting to "recruit" to the Jehovah's Witnesses an under-18-year-old boy whom he had been teaching about the Bible.

In court, the boy himself testified that he had enjoyed studying the Bible with Golik, that he had not been induced to join the

Jehovah's Witnesses' local organisation, and that Golik had never expressed any hatred towards others. The boy's mother confirmed that she had asked Golik to teach her son, as she had had a stroke.

According to the written verdict, seen by Forum 18, Judge Studilko under Criminal Code Article 282.2 and Article 282.2 Part 1.1 imposed an aggregate sentence of 7 years' imprisonment on Golik. This is to be followed by one year and 3 months of restrictions on freedom and 4 years barred from participation in and leadership of public organisations.

For both Golik and Berchuk, post-release restrictions will comprise: a ban on going to sites of mass and other events and participating in them; a ban on leaving their home town; a requirement to gain probation authorities' permission to move house; and a requirement to register with probation authorities once a month.

In his final speech to the court on 22 June 2021, Dmitry Golik insisted that "I don't need any organisation or legal entity to worship God". He added, "Moreover, I am disgusted with extremism, its manifestations, and the very incitement of religious hatred. I am against it, but for some reason I am accused of it. What connection exists between me and extremism, I still do not understand."

"My beliefs are exclusively peaceful, therefore there are no victims or injured parties in the case," Aleksey Berchuk said in his final speech on the same day. "It is unacceptable for me to humiliate human dignity, undermine the foundations of the constitutional order, [or] incite religious or racial hatred. And the prosecution did not bring any evidence to the contrary during the entire trial!"

"The fact that I read the Bible, spoke on biblical topics, and prayed to God with fellow believers – it is sad that the prosecution considers this to be extremism."

Investigators originally opened separate cases against the two men in the summer of 2018 after several months of covert audio and video surveillance (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2412) of Jehovah's Witness meetings for worship. Defence lawyers argued that no "extremist" statements were made in these meetings.

Investigators placed Golik under travel restrictions shortly after they carried out a raid on his home and several other homes in Blagoveshchensk in July 2018. Investigators placed Berchuk under travel restrictions only after he had been arrested at an airport in Moscow in January 2019.

Because they spent no time in detention or under house arrest before conviction, Golik and Berchuk must now serve almost the entirety of their prison terms (reduced only by the time they were detained before their appeal, at a rate of one day to one and a half days in prison).

At the request of the defence, Judge Tatyana Studilko ruled at a preliminary hearing on 9 July 2020 that the criminal cases against the two men should be combined and heard together.

Investigators had both men's names added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687) on 30 August 2018 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2512).

Neither appears on the list of founder members of the formerly registered local Jehovah's Witness religious organisation in Blagoveshchensk, according to federal tax records, or among founder members of the local religious organisation in Birobidzhan.

Forum 18 asked the Amur Region Prosecutor's Office in writing why prosecutors had sought such long jail sentences, why meeting for prayer and Bible reading should be treated as a criminal offence, why Berchuk and Golik were considered dangerous and who had been harmed by their actions. Vitaly Chirey, head of the Prosecutor's Office's Criminal Justice Department, replied on 3 November that "the decision on the type and extent of punishment lies exclusively within the competence of the court, which is not related to the position of the state prosecutor", and that the activities of members of an organisation liquidated as "extremist" "will be of an unlawful nature and subject to legal liability".

The sentences with known punishments are:

Aleksey Aleksandrovich Berchuk (born 17 November 1975)

Added to Rosfinmonitoring List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687): 30 August 2018

Punishments: 8 years' imprisonment + 5 years and 6 months' ban on participation in and leadership of public organisations after release (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) + 1 year and 6 months' restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)

Appeal: unsuccessful – 2 September 2021, Amur Regional Court

Due for release from prison: 27 May 2029

Restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) due to end: 27 November 2030

Ban on activities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) due to end: 27 November 2034

Sudimost and being on Rosfinmonitoring List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) due to end: 27 November 2038

Dmitry Mikhailovich Golik (born 26 March 1987)

Added to Rosfinmonitoring List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687): 30 August 2018

Punishments: 7 years' imprisonment + 4-year ban on participation in and leadership of public organisations after release (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) + 1 year and 3 months' restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)

Appeal: partially successful (Part 1.1 charge dropped and prison term reduced to 6 years and 2 months) – 2 September 2021, Amur Regional Court

Due for release from prison: 29 July 2027

Restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) due to end: 29 October 2028

Ban on activities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) due to end: 29 July 2031

Sudimost and being on Rosfinmonitoring List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) due to end: 29 October 2036

More Blagoveshchensk prosecutions

Five more Jehovah's Witnesses who were under surveillance at the same time as Golik and Berchuk, and some of whose homes were searched (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2412) in the same series of raids in July 2018, are now also on trial at Blagoveshchensk City Court.

Prosecutors charged Sergey Pantaleymonovich Afanasyev (born 30 April 1964), Sergey Alekseyevich Kardakov (born 17 September 1984), Anton Yuryevich Olshevsky (born 31 December 1987), Adam Mikhailovich Svarichevsky (born 20 September 1963), and Sergey Nikolayevich Yermilov (born 20 July 1967) under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 for "organising" a banned alleged "extremist" organisation.

In total, investigators have opened criminal cases against 20 Jehovah's Witnesses in Amur Region, in the towns of Blagoveshchensk, Belogorsk, Zeya, and Tynda. They include Dmitry Golik's wife Kristina Valentinovna Golik (born 1992), who has been charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 for "participation" in a banned alleged "extremist" organisation.

Apart from Dmitry Golik and Aleksey Berchuk, two others – Konstantin Aleksandrovich Moiseyenko (born 17 May 1976) and Vasily Pavlovich Reznichenko (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2668) (born 18 August 1942), both from Zeya – have already been convicted. Both received suspended sentences.

Numbers of prosecutions still rising

More than 540 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 their national-level Administrative Centre (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297) near St Petersburg and its subsidiaries, and the consequent ban on their activities throughout the country.

Courts have sentenced 145 of them, with 14 fines, 87 suspended sentences, and 44 prison terms. Several court decisions have not yet come into force, as appeals are still pending.

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.

In August 2021, a court handed Nakiya Sharifullina, a 63-year-old teacher from Tatarstan, a two-year suspended sentence

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2684) for allegedly organising a "madrassah" in which the works of Said Nursi were discussed. She still faces the risk of being jailed as prosecutors have appealed against the suspended sentence (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2698).

No trials are known to be underway of Muslims who met to study Nursi's works, but four people in Dagestan and Tatarstan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2624) appear to be facing criminal prosecution. (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 the Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis (<https://www.sova-center.ru>), Alexander Verkhovsky, about the systemic problems of Russian "anti-extremism" laws (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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