

16 February 2024

RUSSIA: 42 on Federal Wanted List for exercising freedom of religion or belief

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Russia's Interior Ministry Federal Wanted List includes: 3 opponents of Russia's war against Ukraine on religious grounds; 6 Muslim Nursi readers from Russia; 16 Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia, 4 from Russian-occupied Crimea; 3 people wanted by Belarus; 3 wanted by Kazakhstan; 2 wanted by Tajikistan; 5 wanted by Uzbekistan. The Interior Ministry did not respond to Forum 18's question why it includes people who peacefully exercised their right to freedom of religion or belief. Interpol would not say for how many of them Russia had sought Red Notices.

As of the beginning of February, Russia's Interior Ministry had included in its Federal Wanted List at least 42 individuals facing criminal charges to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief or for reporting on violations of this right. Eleven of these individuals had been included on Russia's list even though they were sought by the authorities of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan.

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- 3 opponents of Russia's war against Ukraine on religious grounds;
- 6 Muslim Nursi readers from Russia;
- 16 Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia;
- 4 Jehovah's Witnesses from Russian-occupied Crimea;
- 3 people wanted by Belarus;
- 3 people wanted by Kazakhstan;
- 2 people wanted by Tajikistan;
- 5 people wanted by Uzbekistan.

The 42 individuals on Russia's Federal Wanted List for exercising freedom of religion or belief are listed at the base of this article. Other individuals on the Federal Wanted List include political opponents of the regimes in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

If any of these individuals wanted in Russia are caught in Russia, arrive in Russia or are caught in states that are friendly to Russia (such as Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan), they risk immediate arrest as investigators complete any criminal case. If any are wanted by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan and are found in Russia, they risk arrest and immediate transfer to that country.

Because Russia is in a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, Russian citizens can travel to these countries without documents. In December 2010, however, the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States signed an agreement to set up an inter-state wanted list (mezhdgosudarstvennyy roysk) for the CIS, enabling information-sharing and cooperation between their state agencies when conducting searches. This and the Federal Wanted List is part of a global pattern of transnational repression, which Human Rights Watch

(<https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/22/we-will-find-you/global-look-how-governments-repress-nationals-abroad>), the Norwegian Helsinki Committee

(<https://www.nhc.no/en/transnational-repression-in-tajikistan-authorities-cut-off-electricity-for-activists-relatives>), and other human rights defenders have documented.

Russia's Federal Wanted List is maintained by the Interior Ministry, with the possibility to search for individuals one at a time on its website. On 13 February, independent Russian media outlet Mediazona published the full list (<https://en.zona.media/article/2024/02/13/wanted>) as of early February. Among the 95,994 individuals on the database published by Mediazona are at least 42 people who are wanted in connection with criminal cases opened against them because of their exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief. A further number are on the list after going missing.

Forum 18 wrote to the Interior Ministry on 14 February, asking why the Federal Wanted List included Russian citizens who had peacefully exercised their right to freedom of religion or belief, as well as citizens of Belarus, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan who had exercised the same right. Forum 18 also asked whether the Interior Ministry had sought Interpol Red Notices for any of these people. Forum 18 had received no response by the afternoon of the working day in Moscow of 16 February.

Some of the individuals on the database Mediazona published matched individuals Forum 18 has previously identified as being on Russia's Federal Wanted List.

Russia is known to have illegally asked Interpol to distribute Red Notices to try to have other countries arrest and transfer at least some of these individuals. Forum 18 sent Interpol a list of those on the Federal Wanted List who Russia wants to punish for exercising freedom of religion or belief, and asked for how many of them Russia had sought Red Notices. Interpol did not answer this question (see below).

"Since the Interpol General Secretariat implemented heightened supervision and monitoring measures in relation to Russia in March 2022," Interpol told Forum 18, "all outgoing Notices, Diffusions and messages from NCB Moscow are first reviewed for compliance by the General Secretariat before being shared with any member country" (see below).

Asked in March 2023, Yuliya Burenina of the National Central Bureau (NCB) for Interpol of Russia's Interior Ministry in Moscow refused to explain why Russia has sought Red Notices for individuals wanted for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. "I'm not authorised to speak to journalists," she told Forum 18 (see below).

[UPDATE 15 May 2024: On 15 May, Mediazona published an updated list (<https://en.zona.media/article/2024/05/15/wanted-may>) as of early May. Added to the list between February and May were:

1) Nikolay Mironovich Nesterovich, born 1992. Russian Muslim Nursi reader (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2889).

2) Yury Vyacheslavovich Roi, born 1978. Belarusian Orthodox priest Fr Georgi Roi, who left Belarus in 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2874), wanted by Belarus.]

Federal Wanted List – mechanisms and consequences

The Federal Wanted List (federalny rozysk) contains the names of those subject to searches on a Russia-wide basis (not internationally), and includes missing persons, men avoiding military service, and people who have not paid debts or child support, as well as individuals who are the subjects of criminal prosecution but whose whereabouts are unknown.

A number of state agencies, including the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Interior Ministry, the Investigative Committee, Federal Customs Service, and the Bailiff Service, can have individuals' names added to the list. The police – part of the Interior Ministry – are responsible for coordinating search activities.

Investigators can usually add a person to the Federal Wanted List only a) after they have determined that he or she cannot be found at home or at the homes of known acquaintances, and b) 6 months after they have put the person's name on local and regional wanted lists and exhausted all search options at those levels (although this may be accelerated in serious cases).

Such a person may be a suspect in a criminal case, or may have been formally charged with an offence, or may already be on trial. Search measures are usually triggered if a person fails to appear for questioning, or in court.

If an individual is added to the Federal Wanted List and remains in Russia, they will be immediately arrested if they come to the attention of the police – "attempting to hide" is grounds for arrest of a suspect under Article 91 of the Criminal Procedural Code, and investigators may also go to court to seek a detention order in absentia. Given that the Interior Ministry notifies the traffic police, transport police, railway stations, and airports, travelling around the country would itself carry significant risk.

It is also likely that investigators will place family and acquaintances under surveillance, including wiretapping, to monitor possible contact, Narodny Yurist legal advice portal noted (<https://narod-yurist.ru/vsyo-o-rozyske-bez-vesti-propavshih-i-prestupnikov>).

When a wanted person is arrested, there is then a much greater chance that they will be placed under stricter restrictive measures

during their investigation and trial than otherwise may have been the case – detention rather than travel restrictions, for instance – as Krasnoyarsk lawyer Aleksey Ivanov commented to legal news site Advokatskaya Gazeta in December 2023 (<https://www.advgazeta.ru/novosti/advokat-dobilysya-priznaniya-nezakonnym-postanovleniya-sledovatelya-o-rozyske-podzashchitno-go/>).

Adding someone to a wanted list is governed by Article 210 of the Criminal Procedural Code. An investigator does this as part of the measures taken upon suspension of an investigation which cannot continue in the absence of the suspect/accused (although it can also be done during a preliminary investigation). According to Article 78 of the Criminal Code, when an investigation is formally suspended, the statute of limitations – the period after which the alleged offender can no longer be prosecuted – is also suspended.

"The limitation period resumes from the moment the accused is detained or surrenders," Moscow lawyer Vadim Klyuvgant told Novaya Gazeta in November 2022 (<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/11/02/ikh-razyskivaet-politsiia-media>). "So even if the political situation in the country changes, the search will not go away – until the criminal case is terminated for some other reason or a court recognises the investigator's decision on the search as illegal."

The statute of limitations stands at 2 years for minor crimes, 6 years for crimes of medium severity, 10 years for severe crimes, and 15 years for extremely severe crimes.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims who read Nursi's works typically face prosecution (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2889) under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 (deemed a severe crime) or Part 2 (a medium-severity crime). People who have protested against the war on religious grounds have been prosecuted (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2885) under Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1 (medium-severity), Article 207.3, Part 1 (medium-severity) or Part 2 (severe).

Russia's illegal requests to Interpol

If a person is believed to have left Russia, they are added to the International Wanted List (mezhdunarodny rozysk) and a request is sent to Interpol for a Red Notice; at the request of the investigator and if the severity of the charge allows, a court may order the person's detention in absentia (meaning that they would be immediately placed in custody at a detention centre if they returned).

Russia is known to have illegally asked Interpol to distribute Red Notices to try to have other countries arrest and transfer at least some of these individuals. Interpol's Rules on the Processing of Data govern the publication and circulation of Red Notices. The Rules state at Article 2 ("Aims") that cooperation such as Red Notices should be "with due respect for the basic rights of the persons who are the subject of the cooperation, in accordance with Article 2 of the Organization's [Interpol's] Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which the said Article refers".

Russia issued two Red Notices (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2584) against Muslims: Timur Atadzhanov in 2018 and Ashurali Magomedeminov in 2020. Both met with other Muslims to study Islam using the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. The third Red Notice was issued later in 2020 against a follower of another faith.

Asked in March 2023, Yuliya Burenina of the National Central Bureau (NCB) for Interpol of Russia's Interior Ministry in Moscow refused to explain why Russia has sought Red Notices (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2818) for individuals wanted for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. "I'm not authorised to speak to journalists," she told Forum 18.

Forum 18 sent Interpol on 14 February 2024 a list of those on the Federal Wanted List Russia is seeking to punish for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Forum 18 asked Interpol for how many of these individuals Interpol had issued Red Notices on behalf of Russia. It also asked for how many such cases Interpol had withdrawn such Red Notices.

Interpol's response of 15 February did not answer Forum 18's questions. "National wanted lists are compiled by a country according to its own criteria," the Interpol response declared. "Individuals on a national wanted list are not automatically sent to Interpol, nor added to our databases. All requests for Notices, including Red Notices are checked by a specialized task force. Any request which is political, military, religious or racial is refused."

"Since the Interpol General Secretariat implemented heightened supervision and monitoring measures in relation to Russia in March 2022," Interpol added, "all outgoing Notices, Diffusions and messages from NCB Moscow are first reviewed for compliance by the General Secretariat before being shared with any member country."

Bank accounts blocked for those facing "extremism"-related charges

For those wanted on "extremism"-related charges (such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims who read the works of Said Nursi), investigators can request to have them added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687), whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (although small transactions are permitted).

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42 on Federal Wanted List due to criminal cases against them for exercising freedom of religion or belief

The 42 individuals on Russia's Federal Wanted List for exercising freedom of religion or belief are listed below. Other individuals on the Federal Wanted List include political opponents of the regimes in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

- Opponents of Russia's war against Ukraine on religious grounds

As well as many convictions for Administrative Code offences (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2835), Russian courts have also convicted four people so far on Criminal Code charges (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2885) for opposing Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine on religious grounds: Fr Nikandr Pinchuk, Mikhail Simonov, Anna Chagina, and Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov. The trial of a fifth - Viktor Pivovarov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2885), Archbishop of an independent Orthodox church which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate – is due to begin on 27 February.

1) Dmitry Leonidovich Bayev (born 1988), Russian Orthodox deacon. The Investigative Committee opened a criminal case against him (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2763) in March 2022 of distributing "false information" about the Russian armed forces.

2) Nina Aleksandrovna Belyayeva (born 1989), Communist municipal deputy and Baptist who had denounced the war (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2809).

3) Yury Kirillovich Sipko (born 1952), Baptist pastor and former head of the Russian Baptist Union who is accused of distributing "false information" about the Russian armed forces (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2852).

- Muslim Nursi readers from Russia

Muslims who meet to study the writings of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi may be prosecuted under the Extremism Law for organising or participating in the activities of "Nurdzhular" (derived from the Turkish for "Nursi followers"). The Supreme Court banned this association as "extremist" in 2008 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215), but Muslims in Russia deny any such formal organisation ever existed. No centralised or local religious organisation associated with Nursi's teachings was registered in Russia before the ban. 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. Further criminal prosecutions continue (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2889).

1) Timur Muzafarovich Atadzhanov (born 1988). Interpol distributed a Red Notice (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2584) on Russia's behalf in 2020.

2) Ashurali Magomedshapiyevich Magomedeminov (born 1972). Interpol distributed a Red Notice (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2584) on Russia's behalf in 2020. Interpol withdrew the Red Notice in 2022.

3) Parviz Yashar-Ogli Mamedov (born 1969). Wanted in Moscow, linked to a group of Muslims readers of Nursi's works currently on trial in Moscow (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2889).

4) Ilhom Zavkidinovich Merazhov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2391) (born 1970)

5) Razhab Faizylgayanovich Shaimuratov (born 1960). Wanted in Moscow, linked to a group of Muslims readers of Nursi's works currently on trial in Moscow (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2889).

6) Anton Pavlovich Starodubtsev (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2310) (born 1980)

- Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia

Jehovah's Witnesses have faced prosecution for continuing to meet, study their faith, and worship after the Supreme Court banned all their organisations as "extremist" in 2017 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297). First-instance courts convicted 147 individuals in 2023, sentencing 47 of them to imprisonment (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2889) (a slight increase on 2022's figure of 44), with the longest prison term of 8 years handed to Dmitry Barmakin (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2842) in Vladivostok. Further criminal prosecutions continue (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2889).

1) Aleksandr Mikhailovich Davydenko (born 1992)

2) Vladimir Alekseyevich Krasnolutsky (born 1975)

3) Oleg Viktorovich Lonshakov (born 1977). Belarus refused Russia's extradition request in 2021.

4) Aleksandr Alekseyevich Loshkarev (born 1958)

5) Nikolai Andreyevich Makhalichev (born 1984). Belarus refused Russia's extradition request (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2562) in 2020.

6) Vitaly Gennadyevich Maksimov (born 1980)

7) Igor Yevgenyevich Mironchik (born 1970)

8) Olga Vladimirovna Ponomaryova (born 1974)

9) Dmitry Andreyevich Prikhodko (born 1986)

10) Nikolai Sergeyevich Salmanov (born 1997)

11) Sergei Yuryevich Semenyuk (born 1976)

12) Sergei Alekseyevich Svetonosov (born 1975)

13) Aleksey Sergeyevich Volkov (born 1978)

14) Anna Vladimirovna Yermak (born 1982)

15) Yury Kirillovich Yumashev (born 1956)

16) Igor Vladimirovich Zhukov (born 1986)

- Jehovah's Witnesses from Russian-occupied Crimea

Courts in Russian-occupied Crimea have handed jail terms of at least six years to 12 Jehovah's Witnesses, with two suspended sentences. Further criminal prosecutions continue (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2818).

1) Aleksandr Viktorovich Kostenko (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2648) (born 1991)

2) Mark Stepanovich Lyakh (born 1997)

3) Tadevos Derenikovich Manukyan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2818) (born 1981)

4) Ivan Aleksandrovich Yefanov (born 1984)

- People wanted by Belarus

Russia's Federal Wanted List includes many individuals wanted on criminal charges in Belarus, including 8 human rights defenders (<https://spring96.org/en/news/114381>).

1) Vyacheslav Zygmundovich Borok (Barok) (born 1975). Catholic priest Fr Barok was charged in July 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2674) for his opposition to election fraud and regime violence, and fled to neighbouring Poland.

2) Pyotr Yanovich Rudkovsky (born 1978). Catholic layperson and regular commentator on Vatican Radio's Belarusian Service (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/v-spiske-nahodyashhihsya-v-rozyske-mvd-rossii-katolicheskij-intellektual-pyotr-rudkovskij/>).

3) Andrei Nikolayevich Voshchuk (Vashchuk) (born 1984). Catholic priest from Vitebsk jailed in 2022 (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/eshhe-odin-belorusskij-katolicheskij-svyashhennik-v-baze-rozyska-mvd-rossijskoj-federaczii-and-rej-vashhuk-sds/>) for a total of 30 days. Left Belarus in August 2022.

- People wanted by Kazakhstan

The 3 individuals wanted by Kazakhstan were leaders of Almaty's New Life Pentecostal Church who currently live in the United

States. An Almaty court jailed the 3 pastors in absentia for between four and five years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2251) to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief. The case was described as "complete drivel" by Yevgeny Zhovtis of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law. "I have read the verdict. It is nonsense." New Life Church has been told its problems will end if it pays money to officials or collaborates with the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police.

1) Maxim Alekseyevich Maximov (born 1970)

2) Larisa Anatolyevna Maximova (born 1963)

3) Sergei Borisovich Zaikin (born 1975)

- People wanted by Tajikistan

The 2 individuals wanted by Tajikistan are a married couple who are exiled human rights defenders and journalists who have written about the regime's multiple serious violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, committed against Ismaili Muslims in Mountainous Badakhshan Region (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880). "This will not break us, and we will continue reporting on human rights violations," Sarkorova told Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2894) after being placed on the Russian Federal Wanted List.

1) Rustamjon Saiburkhonovich Joniyev (born 1974)

2) Anora Badilzamonovna Sarkorova (born 1974)

- People wanted by Uzbekistan

1) Odilbek Yusupbekovich Khojabekov (born 1974)

In December 2019 a Tashkent court fined Khojabekov and ordered destroyed religious books brought back from the haj. He was then punished under Criminal Code Article 246, Part 1 ("Smuggling, that is carriage through the customs border .. without the knowledge of or with concealment from customs control .. materials that propagandise religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism") for earlier having a religious book on his mobile phone which he subsequently deleted. The court handed him a five-year suspended prison sentence, with a two-year probation period. In May 2021, a Tashkent judge freed him from further supervision as he had abided by the conditions. Prosecutors – with secret police backing – claimed he had violated the conditions and launched a new criminal case. A court jailed him in absentia for five years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2688).

2) Khanifa Yakubovna Mirganiyeva (born 1974). Wanted after her husband Alijon Mirganiyev was jailed in October 2022 for seven years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2834) after he returned to Uzbekistan from Turkey. The family think Mirganiyev was targeted in 2006 as his wife Khanifa Mirganiyeva was teaching female family members to read the Koran, Mirganiyev was praying and discussing Islam with other men, and their children were being raised as Muslims.

3) Alisher Yakubovich Ismanov (born 1978). Mirganiyeva's brother, also wanted in same case as the jailed Alijon Mirganiyev.

4) Mukhammad-Amin Alijon ugli Makhmudov (born 1995). Son of the jailed Alijon Mirganiyev and wanted in same case.

5) Bairamali Nasrullayevich Yusupov (born 1979). Fled Uzbekistan in 2006. Authorities questioned and tortured then prison of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2477) and others to try to find out where Yusupov is. Yusupov told Forum 18 that "the authorities claimed that almost everyone who [like himself] finished a Turkish-run school and was active in mosques might be 'extremist'."

(END)

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

For background information see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897).

The then-Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, Alexander Verkhovsky, in July 2010 wrote a personal commentary about the systemic problems of Russian "anti-extremism" laws (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1468). This organisation was forcibly liquidated in August 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1468), and a group of its former staff are now a community of researchers under the name of SOVA Research Center (<https://www.sova-center.ru/en/about-us/>).

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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