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RUSSIA: "Extremism" prosecutions of elderly Jehovah's Witnesses

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

Courts have convicted 467 Jehovah's Witnesses from 2017 up to 18 March 2024, and ultimately acquitted none. Over a quarter of the Jehovah's Witnesses prosecuted have been aged 60 or older, with 12 individuals aged at least 80. The sentences imposed have ranged from heavy fines to some of the longest prison terms – of 7 years or more – handed down to Jehovah's Witnesses. On 15 March, 72-year-old Sergey Vasilyev became the oldest Jehovah's Witness currently imprisoned for exercising his right to freedom of religion and belief after he was sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment.

Since Russia's Supreme Court ordered the liquidation of Jehovah's Witness organisations in 2017 and outlawed their activities as "extremist", more than 760 people have faced prosecution under Criminal Code Article 282.2 for "organising" (Part 1), or "participating in" (Part 2) the activities of a banned "extremist" organisation.

Muslims who meet to study the writings of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi are also prosecuted under the Extremism Law, for organising or participating in the activities of "Nurdzhular" which was banned as an "extremist" organisation in 2008. The activities being prosecuted are very similar to the activities Jehovah's Witnesses are prosecuted for. Such Muslims typically 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. The numbers of such prosecutions are small in comparison to the numbers of Jehovah's Witness prosecutions. No Muslims aged 60 or over are known to have been imprisoned for meeting to study Nursi's works (see below).

First-instance courts have convicted 467 Jehovah's Witnesses from 2017 up to 18 March 2024, and ultimately acquitted none. Over a quarter of the Jehovah's Witnesses prosecuted have been aged 60 or older, with 12 individuals aged at least 80. The majority of cases come to trial, and so far courts have found all defendants guilty. The sentences imposed have ranged from heavy fines to some of the longest prison terms of 7 years or more handed down to Jehovah's Witnesses (see below).

Most recently, on 15 March 85-year-old Yury Yuskov, from the Chuvash Republic, received a 5-year suspended sentence with 4 years' probation under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation"), and Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation"). Yuskov is the oldest person since 2017 to have been so convicted (see below).

Yuskov told the court in his final statement on 13 March 2024. "And what is in the five volumes of my so-called criminal case is complete absurdity. Moreover, in these volumes there is not a single piece of evidence or fact confirming the charge of malicious crimes that are attributed to me. I am proud to be a Jehovah's Witness, and I will never renounce this, no matter what they threaten me with" (see below).

Forum 18 asked the Prosecutor's Office of the Chuvash Republic on 11 March 2024 in whose interests it was to prosecute an 85-year-old man, in what way Yuskov could be considered dangerous, and who had been harmed by his actions. No response has been received.

On 5 March 2024, 72-year-old Sergey Vasilyev became the oldest Jehovah's Witness currently imprisoned for exercising his right to freedom of religion and belief. A court in Irkutsk sentenced him to 3 years' imprisonment under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 (see below).

In his final statement to the court on 24 January 2024, Vasilyev stated: "Now I am being judged for the fact that I wanted to help citizen Klokov [a prosecution witness] understand the Bible, and for the fact that I discussed the Bible with other Jehovah's Witnesses at services. I use the Bible to try to show love for all people and respect government authorities. If, according to state laws, this is a crime, then I am ready to suffer any punishment, although at 72 years old and with many illnesses, it will be difficult for me to be in a colony" (see below).

Forum 18 asked Irkutsk Region Prosecutor's Office on 11 March 2024 in whose interests it was to prosecute 72-year-old Vasilyev

and his fellow defendants 65-year-old Nikolay Martynov, and 63-year-old Sergey Kosteyev, why prosecutors had sought such long sentences, in what way the defendants could be considered dangerous, and who had been harmed by their actions. No response has been received.

Eighty-year-old Nadezhda Ivanovna Korobochko (born 2 August 1943) is the oldest Jehovah's Witness currently on trial. Investigators searched her home in Khabarovsk Region and questioned her as a suspect on 11 October 2021, placing her under travel restrictions a few days later. The case reached Nikolayevsk-on-Amur City Court on 19 December 2022, and their next hearing is due to take place on 27 March 2024, according to the court website. The prosecution has caused Korobochko's health to worsen, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses stated (see below).

Twelve Jehovah's Witnesses have faced prosecution aged at least 80, or have turned 80 while serving their sentences. Courts have so far found eight of them guilty of organising or participating in the activities of an "extremist organisation", or of involving another person in such activities.

Investigators dropped the charges against two people, while one woman is still on trial, and court proceedings against another woman have been suspended because of her poor health (see below).

Forum 18 wrote to the General Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation and the Federal Investigative Committee on 8 March 2024, asking in whose interests it is to prosecute and sometimes imprison people in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, who are often in poor health, who have simply exercised their right to freedom of conscience and religious belief.

Forum 18 also asked in what way these people could be considered dangerous and who had been harmed by their actions.

No response has been received.

"Extremism" prosecutions of elderly Jehovah's Witnesses

Since Russia's Supreme Court ordered the liquidation of Jehovah's Witness organisations in 2017 and outlawed their activities as "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), more than 760 people have faced prosecution under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) for "organising" (Part 1), or "participating in" (Part 2) the activities of a banned "extremist" organisation.

Muslims who meet to study the writings of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi are also prosecuted under the Extremism Law, for organising or participating in the activities of "Nurdzhular" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) which was banned as an "extremist" organisation in 2008. Muslims in Russia deny any such formal organisation ever existed. The activities being prosecuted are very similar to the activities Jehovah's Witnesses are prosecuted for. Such Muslims typically 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.

The numbers of such prosecutions are small in comparison to the numbers of Jehovah's Witness prosecutions. The oldest person known to have been convicted of "participating in the activities" of "Nurdzhular" is Nakiya Khametzakirovna Sharifullina (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2684) (born 1 January 1958). On 31 August 2021, Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court handed the then-63-year-old teacher a 2-year suspended sentence, with 18 months' probation.

No Muslims aged 60 or over are known to have been imprisoned for meeting to study Nursi's works.

First-instance courts have convicted 467 Jehovah's Witnesses from 2017 up to 18 March 2024, and ultimately acquitted none. A total of 127 Jehovah's Witnesses are on trial in first-instance courts as of mid-March 2024, while another 147 remain under investigation or awaiting court appearances. Investigators and prosecutors have dropped the criminal charges against only 21 people, three of whom are dead.

Of those convicted, 147 have received prison terms ranging from one to eight years in length, while 248 have received suspended sentences and 60 fines. Five people have been sentenced to terms of assigned work (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) (prinuditelniye raboty). One man was found guilty posthumously, but the court issued no sentence. The sentences of six convicted people remain unclear.

Over a quarter of the Jehovah's Witnesses prosecuted have been aged 60 or older, with 12 individuals aged at least 80. The majority of cases come to trial, and so far courts have found all defendants guilty under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 of "participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation." Some have also been found guilty under Criminal Code Article 282.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Financing extremist activity"), apparently for continuing to collect donations for activities from other Jehovah's Witnesses.

The sentences imposed have ranged from heavy fines to some of the longest prison terms handed down to Jehovah's Witnesses.

March 2024 convictions

Most recently, on 15 March 85-year-old Yury Yuskov, from the Chuvash Republic, received a 5-year suspended sentence with 4 years' probation under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation"), and Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 2 ("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation"). Yuskov is the oldest person since 2017 to have been so convicted (see below).

On 5 March 2024, 72-year-old Sergey Vasilyev became the oldest Jehovah's Witness currently imprisoned for exercising his right to freedom of religion and belief. A court in Irkutsk sentenced him to 3 years' imprisonment under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 (see below).

On 6 March 2024, seven Jehovah's Witnesses aged 61 to 73 (alongside six younger fellow defendants) received suspended sentences at Magadan City Court. These ranged from 3 years with 2 years' probation, to 7 years with 5 years' probation.

Oldest sentenced to imprisonment: "If this is a crime, I am ready to suffer any punishment"

The oldest person currently sentenced to imprisonment for exercising freedom of religion and belief as a Jehovah's Witness is Sergey Yevgenyevich Vasilyev (born 21 May 1951). On 5 March 2024, October District Court in Irkutsk sentenced him to 3 years' imprisonment under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 2 ("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation"), alongside eight other Jehovah's Witnesses who all received longer prison terms.

Two of Vasilyev's fellow defendants, 65-year-old Nikolay Aleksandrovich Martynov (born 26 August 1958) and 63-year-old Sergey Vladimirovich Kosteyev (born 9 May 1960), received 7-year prison terms under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation"), and Criminal Code Article 282.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Financing extremist activity"). Both were also sentenced to 1 year and 2 months of restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) after release, and a 5-year ban on organising the activities of public and religious associations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897).

Six younger Jehovah's Witnesses were also handed prison sentences in the same trial.

Martynov, Kosteyev, and Vasilyev were all added to the Federal Financial Monitoring (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) on 8 October 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2693).

If Vasilyev's sentence enters legal force, he will be subject after release to 6 months of restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) and a 3-year ban on participating in public and religious associations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897).

Vasilyev will also have a criminal record (sudimost) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) for eight years and will remain on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) throughout this time. During this time, he will be subject to a wide range of financial limitations, including the requirement to seek Rosfinmonitoring permission to withdraw his pension.

The men were detained during 4 October 2021 early morning raids by over 100 armed OMON riot police and Investigative Committee personnel on Jehovah's Witness homes (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2693) in the city of Irkutsk and nearby villages. The raiders tortured some of the Jehovah's Witnesses, but in contravention of Russia's legally-binding obligations under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) no suspect torturers are known to have been detained and put on criminal trial for torture.

In his final statement to the court on 24 January 2024, Vasilyev described how becoming a Jehovah's Witness helped him change his life for the better, after committing crimes in his youth and serving two prison terms.

"And now I'm being put on trial again. But what are they judging me for this time? If earlier, I really committed crimes and deservedly suffered punishment, now I am being judged for the fact that I wanted to help citizen Klovov [a prosecution witness] understand the Bible, and for the fact that I discussed the Bible with other Jehovah's Witnesses at services. I use the Bible to try to show love for all people and respect government authorities. If, according to state laws, this is a crime, then I am ready to suffer any punishment, although at 72 years old and with many illnesses, it will be difficult for me to be in a colony".

Vasilyev had spent most of the investigation and trial under house arrest, apart from 10 days in detention after his initial arrest. He was taken into custody from the courtroom on 5 March 2024 after his 3-year prison sentence was handed down.

Vasilyev's fellow defendants had all been in detention since their arrests in October and November 2021. They all intend to appeal, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses stated on 5 March 2024.

Forum 18 asked Irkutsk Region Prosecutor's Office on 11 March 2024 in whose interests it was to prosecute 72-year-old Vasilyev, 65-year-old Martynov, and 63-year-old Kosteyev, why prosecutors had sought such long sentences, in what way the defendants could be considered dangerous, and who had been harmed by their actions. No response has been received.

Vasilyev and his eight fellow defendants are awaiting their appeals at the following detention centre address:

664019 g. Irkutsk

ul. Barrikad 63

FKU Sledstvenniy izolyator No. 1 UFSIN Rossii po Irkutskoy oblasti

Before Vasilyev's sentencing, the oldest Jehovah's Witness sentenced to imprisonment was Anatoly Viktorovich Marunov (born 10 November 1953). Savyolovsky District Court in Moscow found him and two younger fellow defendants guilty on 12 July 2023. Marunov was sentenced to 6 years and 6 months' imprisonment under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation"), plus 1 year's restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)s and a 3-year ban on leadership of and participating in public organisations). They three defendants currently remain in detention awaiting appeal.

Marunov's detention centre address is:

446010, g. Syzran

ul. Khlebtsevich 1

FKU Sledstvenniy izolyator No. 2 UFSIN Rossii po Samarskoy oblasti

Oldest convicted: "I am proud to be a Jehovah's Witness, and I will never renounce this, no matter what they threaten me with"

On 15 March 2024, Yury Georgiyevich Yuskov (born 5 May 1938) became the oldest Jehovah's Witness to be found guilty of "extremism"-related offences. Novocheboksarsk City Court in the Chuvash Republic convicted him under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation"), and Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 2 ("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation"). He was given a 5-year suspended sentence, with a 4-year probationary period and 1 year and 4 months of restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897).

Prosecutors had requested a 5-year suspended sentence with 2 years and 6 months of probation, noting Yuskov's age as a mitigating factor.

The Federal Security Service (FSB) in the Chuvash Republic first searched Yuskov's home in November 2020 as part of a criminal case against three Jehovah's Witnesses from the city of Cheboksary, who were later convicted and handed large fines. Investigators confiscated electronic devices and photographs, but released Yuskov after questioning.

In early May 2023, the FSB opened a separate criminal case against Yuskov himself, searched his home again, and charged him under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 and Part 2. They placed him under travel restrictions during the investigation. Investigators accused Yuskov of "carried out preaching activities, expressed in holding conversations and instruction in religious doctrine". They also claimed that he had promoted the breakdown of family relationships. Yuskov stated in court that he had been married for nearly 60 years to someone who had not shared his religious views, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses noted on 15 March.

Yuskov intends to appeal against his conviction, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses stated on 15 March. If his sentence enters legal force, he will not have to go to prison, but runs the risk of doing so if he is found guilty of another crime or repeated administrative offence during his probationary period. He will have to register regularly with probation authorities, and his restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) may include a night-time curfew, an obligation to inform probation authorities of any change of address, and a ban on visiting particular locations or travelling abroad.

Investigators had Yuskov's name added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) on 17 May 2023. He will stay on it until the end of his 4-year probationary period, when his sudimost (criminal record, state of being a convicted person) expires.

"In our country, 475 sentences have been passed against 796 Jehovah's Witnesses. The guilt of all these believers, including mine, is precisely that we are Jehovah's Witnesses, and this is our entire crime", Yuskov told the court in his final statement on 13 March 2024. "And what is in the five volumes of my so-called criminal case is complete absurdity. Moreover, in these volumes there is not a single piece of evidence or fact confirming the charge of malicious crimes that are attributed to me. I am proud to be a Jehovah's Witness, and I will never renounce this, no matter what they threaten me with".

Forum 18 asked the Prosecutor's Office of the Chuvash Republic on 11 March 2024 in whose interests it was to prosecute an 85-year-old man, in what way Yuskov could be considered dangerous, and who had been harmed by his actions. No response has been received.

Before Yuskov's conviction, the oldest Jehovah's Witness to have been convicted under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) was Zinaida Ivanovna Minenko (born 24 January 1940), who was charged under Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation").

On 26 November 2021, six households in Zheleznovodsk (Stavropol Region) were raided (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2702), after which investigators opened a criminal case against Minenko, who was put under travel restrictions. She was accused of "conducting conversations in order to promote [the Jehovah's Witness community's] activities [and] recruit new participants". On 16 October 2023, Zheleznovodsk District Court in Stavropol Region fined her 330,000 Roubles. A fine of 330,000 Roubles represented nearly 18 months' average pension in Stavropol Region as of January 2024.

The Stavropol Region Investigative Committee initially also charged her under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 2 ("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation"), but later dropped this. Investigators placed her under travel restrictions, but did not have her name added to the Rosfinmonitoring List.

Forum 18 asked the Stavropol Region Prosecutor's Office on 11 March 2024 in whose interests it was to prosecute an 80-year-old woman, in what way Minenko could be considered dangerous, and who had been harmed by her actions. No response has been received.

Oldest Jehovah's Witness currently on trial

Eighty-year-old Nadezhda Ivanovna Korobochko (born 2 August 1943) is the oldest Jehovah's Witness currently on trial. Investigators searched her home in Khabarovsk Region and questioned her as a suspect on 11 October 2021, placing her under travel restrictions a few days later.

She and her and her three fellow defendants Igor Sergeyevich Kletkin (born 10 May 1961), Nikolay Nikolayevich Kononenko (born 22 January 1982), and Vladislav Vladimirovich Markov (born 1 September 1983) are all charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation"), and Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 2 ("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation").

The case reached Nikolayevsk-on-Amur City Court on 19 December 2022, and their next hearing is due to take place on 27 March 2024, according to the court website. The prosecution has caused Korobochko's health to worsen, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses stated.

Oldest Jehovah's Witnesses ever to have faced prosecution

The oldest Jehovah's Witnesses ever to have faced prosecution are Rimma Mikhailovna Vashchenko (17 August 1930 – January 2021) and Yelena Viktorovna Zayshchuk (born 25 August 1934).

Vashchenko, from Stavropol Region, died at the age of 90 in January 2021 while still under investigation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687). Shortly before investigators opened the case against her, she had been diagnosed with a progressive brain disease, according to the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses. At the time of her death she was the oldest person (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2637) on the Federal Financial Monitoring Service "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897). Her name was removed from the List on 15 April 2022, more than a year after her death.

Yelena Zayshchuk is one of seven Jehovah's Witnesses against whom the Federal Security Service (FSB) opened a criminal case in

April 2018 after raiding her home in Vladivostok (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571). Her family "do not understand why they are persecuting an elderly and sick person who has done nothing wrong to anyone", the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses commented at the time. This was only the third case to be initiated since the nationwide ban on the activity of Jehovah's Witness organisations, which had come into force in July 2017.

In April 2019, investigators charged Zayshchuk and five other women (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571) – Nadezhda Anatolyevna Anoykina (born 11 January 1958), Lyubov Aleksandrovna Galaktionova (born 14 July 1942), Nailya Sunatovna Kogay (born 5 October 1951), Nina Ivanovna Purge (born 19 June 1940), and Raisa Mikhailovna Usanova (born 28 September 1949) under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 2 ("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation").

Zayshchuk, Galaktionova, Kogay and Purge all suffer from poor health (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571), the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses noted in May 2020. Being subject to criminal investigation and trial for more than two years has worsened their underlying conditions.

Their fellow defendant Valentin Pavlovich Osadchuk (born 15 March 1976) was charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation").

In January 2021, Vladivostok's Lenin District Court began re-considering the case, after initially returning it to prosecutors in November 2019. In February 2021 the judge suspended criminal proceedings against the then-86-year-old Zayshchuk (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571) because she was suffering from serious illness. The same court reiterated this decision on 30 March 2023, according to Jehovah's Witness lawyers. Although prosecutors have not dropped the charge against her – so, theoretically, she could be taken to court again – Jehovah's Witness lawyers think this is unlikely, given her age and state of health, they told Forum 18 on 13 March 2024.

Zayshchuk's fellow defendants all received suspended sentences on 1 June 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2747).

After Vashchenko's death, Zayshchuk became the oldest person on the Federal Financial Monitoring Service "List of Terrorists and Extremists (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)."

Forum 18 asked the Primorye Region Prosecutor's Office on 11 March 2024 whether it was likely that Zayshchuk would have to return to court, and in whose interests it was to prosecute her and her fellow defendants in the first place, particularly given their ages and state of health. No response has been received.

Numbers

Twenty-seven Jehovah's Witnesses aged 60 or over are known to be under investigation, while 33 are currently on trial, according to information from the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Twenty-six have received prison sentences, of whom 14 are serving their sentences in prison colonies, seven are in detention awaiting appeal, and three have already been released from prison and are now under restrictions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897). One woman was released early and is no longer under restrictions. One man was released from the courtroom because he was deemed to have served his term in detention.

Courts have handed suspended sentences (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) to 68 people who were aged 60 or over at sentencing or who turned 60 during their probationary periods (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897). Forty-two of them are currently serving probation, while 16 are awaiting appeal.

Ten people received fines at the age of 60 or more, and one woman has been sentenced to assigned work (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) and is awaiting appeal. Another man also received an assigned work term, but this was changed to a suspended sentence on appeal.

Deaths

The above figures do not include the nine Jehovah's Witnesses who died while under investigation or on trial. Two more are known to have died shortly after investigators dropped the charges against them. Eight of these people were aged 60 or over, two were in their 50s, and one in her 40s.

Over-80s prosecuted as "extremists"

Twelve Jehovah's Witnesses have faced prosecution aged at least 80, or have turned 80 while serving their sentences. Courts have so far found eight of them guilty of organising or participating in the activities of an "extremist organisation", or of involving another

person in such activities.

Investigators dropped the charges against two people, while one woman (Nadezhda Korobochko- see above) is still on trial, and court proceedings against another woman (Yelena Zayshchuk – see above) have been suspended because of her poor health.

Another woman, Kaleriya Mamykina, died at the age of 80, a year and a half after investigators dropped the charges against her on 27 November 2019 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2624). She died without having received the compensation she was due (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2667).

Forum 18 wrote to the General Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation and the Federal Investigative Committee on 8 March 2024, asking in whose interests it is to prosecute and sometimes imprison people in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, who are often in poor health, who have simply exercised their right to freedom of conscience and religious belief.

Forum 18 also asked in what way these people could be considered dangerous and who had been harmed by their actions.

No response has been received.

Over-60s sentenced to imprisonment include:

– Valentina Ivanovna Baranovskaya (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2662), born 8 April 1951:

2 years' imprisonment plus 6 months' restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897);

Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 2 ("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation");

21 February 2021, Abakan City Court, Republic of Khakassiya.

Baranovskaya was imprisoned despite her documented poor health, and was the first (and is still the oldest) woman to receive a prison term. A court granted her second application for conditional early release [uslovno-dosrochnoye osvobozhdeniye] on 22 February 2022, and she left prison on 4 May 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2747) after prosecutors unsuccessfully challenged this ruling.

She is no longer known to be under any restrictions, but her name will remain on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)" (to which it was added on 31 August 2021) until her criminal record (sudimost) expires in November 2030.

- Yury Prokopyevich Savelyev (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2623), born 1 January 1954:

6 years' imprisonment plus 1 year's restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) and 3-year ban on the organisation of or participation in the activities of public and religious associations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897);

Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation");

16 December 2020, Lenin District Court, Novosibirsk.

Savelyev served his full prison term (reduced by the time he had spent in detention during the investigation and trial) and was released on 19 July 2023. Prison authorities twice put him in isolation for alleged minor infringements of regulations, then transferred him to strict-regime conditions for his last nine months in the colony. Savelyev described conditions there as good and well-ordered, but he had only one or two hours a day for exercise and suffered a bout of severe pneumonia in the spring of 2023, according to the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses.

He will remain under restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) until 19 July 2024, and his criminal record (sudimost) will expire in July 2031; his name will also remain on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)" until then.

– Nikolay Nikolayevich Kuzichkin (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2663), born 28 February 1951:

1 year and 1 month's imprisonment;

Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation");

18 December 2020, Khostinsky District Court, Sochi, Krasnoar Region.

Kuzichkin was released from court immediately after sentencing because he was considered to have already served his term in detention and under house arrest during the investigation and trial. During his 194 days in detention, he suffered from severe hypertension and heart problems, but the detention centre authorities denied him medical examination and treatment. After a prosecutor's office investigation concluded that he had been inappropriately treated, an appeal court eventually ruled that he should be transferred to house arrest. He arrived home on 22 April 2020, "in an extremely weakened state, barely able to stand", according to the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Kuzichkin is not under any restrictions, but will remain on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) (to which his name was added on 1 April 2020) until his criminal record (sudimost) expires in December 2028.

– Vilen Shagenovich Avanesov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2684), born 22 October 1952:

6 years' imprisonment plus 1 year's restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) and 5-year ban on participating in public associations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897);

Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation");

21 July 2021, Lenin District Court, Rostov-on-Don.

Avanesov was released on 9 February 2024, his time in detention during the investigation and trial having been taken into account. According to the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, the prison administration went to court to have administrative supervision imposed on him after his release, but the judge refused this.

Avanesov will remain under restrictions until 9 February 2025 and on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) (to which his name was added on 13 June 2019) until his criminal record (sudimost) expires in February 2032.

People aged 60 and over jailed for 7 years or more include:

– Aleksandr Yevgenyevich Ivshin (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2662), born 21 August 1957:

7 years and 6 months' imprisonment, plus 1 year's restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) and 5-year ban on organising or participating in public associations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897);

Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation");

10 February 2021, Abinsk District Court, Krasnodar Region.

Ivshin is due to be released on 14 April 2028 (taking into account the time he spent in detention between his conviction and appeal). He does not appear on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897).

– Sergey Ivanovich Kosyanenko, born 11 June 1961:

7 years' imprisonment plus 1 year's restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) and 3-year ban on participating in public and religious associations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897);

Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation") and Criminal Code Article 282.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Financing extremist activity");

17 April 2023, Akhtubinsk District Court, Astrakhan Region.

Kosyanenko is due to be released on 15 December 2027 (taking into account the time he spent in detention during the investigation

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2697) and between his conviction and appeal). Investigators had his name added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)" on 19 December 2022.

– Aleksandr Viktorovich Skvortsov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2845), born 11 June 1962:

7 years' imprisonment plus 1 year's restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) and 2-year ban on the organisation of or participation in public and religious associations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897);

Criminal Code Article 282.2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation");

20 June 2023, Taganrog City Court, Rostov Region.

Skvortsov is due to be released on 30 January 2028 (taking into account time spent in detention during investigation and between conviction and appeal). Investigators had his name added to Rosfinmonitoring List on 21 December 2021. (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)

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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