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RUSSIA: Second jail term for discussing faith during first term

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

Jehovah's Witness Dmitry Terebilov was due for release from his 3-year prison term in September 2024. But he was already being prosecuted for answering a fellow-prisoner's questions about his faith. Using covert recordings, a court in Kostroma jailed him for just over five years for "continuing the activities of a banned extremist organisation". "I cannot understand what evil I have committed and to whom," Terebilov told the court. Neither the court nor the Prosecutor's Office responded to questions. A Vladivostok court jailed two Jehovah's Witness men and handed five women suspended sentences.

Dmitry Terebilov, from the central Russian city of Kostroma, has become the first Jehovah's Witness to be convicted for a second time of "continuing the activities of a banned extremist organisation". On 23 January, a court jailed him again, this time for just over five years, for answering a fellow inmate's questions about his faith during his first prison term. The case partially relied on covert recordings of their discussions.

If the court verdict enters legal force, Terebilov will serve his new sentence in a strict-regime labour camp ("correctional colony") (see below).

Investigators charged 45-year-old Terebilov with "Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation" (Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1) and "Participating in a banned extremist organisation" (Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2) in December 2023 (see below).

On 6 September 2024, Terebilov completed a 3-year prison sentence imposed under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2. He was not released, however, as he had been placed in detention for the duration of his second trial. He remains in custody in Kostroma while awaiting appeal (see below).

Although several other Jehovah's Witnesses have been subject to multiple prosecutions, these investigations and trials have generally overlapped. Terebilov appears to be the first person to be prosecuted for an incident unrelated to the activity which led to his first conviction, and which took place well after the conclusion of his previous case, when he was already imprisoned (see below).

As well as covert recordings of Terebilov's conversations with his cellmate, investigators used letters he received from fellow Jehovah's Witnesses as evidence of his participation in "extremist activity", despite the fact that the labour camp censor testified that the letters contained no "calls to incite hatred or enmity" (see below).

"I cannot understand what evil I have committed and to whom", Terebilov said in court. "How can I understand what is allowed and what is not? The authorities say that my religion is not banned, I can practice it if there is no extremism in my actions, and there has never been. But law enforcement officials believe that whatever I do as a Jehovah's Witness is already a crime" (see below).

After Terebilov realised he was not receiving letters which used the name Jehovah for God, the administration of his labour camp told him in writing that there is "a ban on using the name of God [ie. Jehovah] in letters and professing the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses in the colony". Terebilov unsuccessfully tried to have a court rule the labour camp's actions unlawful (see below).

Forum 18 asked Sverdlovsk District Court why it considers answering questions from a fellow inmate constitute involving another person in the activities of an extremist organisation; why the judge imposed such a long jail term; and who has been harmed by Terebilov's actions, and why he is considered dangerous. Forum 18 also asked Kostroma Region Prosecutor's Office why it had demanded such a long jail term. Forum 18 received no responses (see below).

In the first three months of 2025, investigators have continued to initiate criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses and carry out armed raids on their homes, and courts have continued to convict Jehovah's Witnesses under anti-extremism legislation for exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief (see below).

On 3 February, a court in Vladivostok found seven Jehovah's Witness guilty under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Parts 1 and 2 after one of the longest running criminal cases since the Supreme Court's 2017 liquidation of Jehovah's Witness organisation and

nationwide ban on their activities. The judge handed two men prison sentences of seven years and six and a half years. They too are now awaiting appeal. Their fellow defendants – all women – received suspended sentences (see below).

Neither Vladivostok's Pervorechensk District Court nor Primorye Region Prosecutor's Office responded to Forum 18's questions on the prosecutions and sentences (see below).

Muslims who read the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi are also prosecuted under the Extremism Law. In the most recent known prosecution, a Moscow court jailed two men in July 2024. No other prosecutions of Muslims who meet to study Nursi's works are known to be underway at present (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims both prosecuted on "extremism" charges

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=2297), more than 820 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. They are accused of organising or participating in the activities of "Nurdzhular", which the Supreme Court banned as an "extremist" organisation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) in 2008. Muslims in Russia deny any such formal organisation ever existed.

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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), and do not seek state permission to meet.

Similarly, Jehovah's Witnesses are prosecuted because they continue to meet to pray, sing hymns, and read the Bible together. Unlike Nursi readers, however, some have also been charged with "financing extremist activity" (Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1), and "Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation" (Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1).

The most recent Nursi-related "extremism" trial was that of Zurab Magomedgabibovich Dzhabrailov (born 14 December 1978) and Dzheykhun Fikret ogly Rustamov (born 10 July 1970). On 10 July 2024, Moscow's Kuzminsky District Court sentenced Dzhabrailov to 6 years' imprisonment (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2922) under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of the activities of a banned extremist organisation"), and Rustamov to 2 years and 9 months' imprisonment under Part 2 ("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation").

Both men appealed unsuccessfully against their convictions at Moscow City Court on 11 December 2024, according to the Moscow court system website. They plan to lodge cassational appeals in April 2025, a fellow Muslim who has been following the case from outside Russia told Forum 18 on 23 March.

No other prosecutions of Muslims who meet to study Nursi's works are known to be underway at present.

Jehovah's Witness prosecutions continuing

The first three months of 2025 have seen 36 people convicted of "continuing the activities" of banned Jehovah's Witness organisations. Most recently, these have included Olga Feliksovna Kalinnikova (born 4 December 1976) and Larisa Valentinovna Potapova (born 21 March 1964), who were convicted under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 and Part 2 at Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk City Court on the Far Eastern island of Sakhalin on 24 March. They both received suspended sentences of 2 years and 6 months, with 2 years' probation and 8 months' restrictions on freedom.

On 6 March, Kaltan District Court in Kemerovo Region found Aleksandr Gennadyevich Tsikunov (born 25 November 1967) guilty under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of the activities of a banned extremist organisation"). The Judge sentenced him to 6 years' imprisonment, with 1 year's restrictions on freedom and a 5-year ban on engaging in educational activities.

Elderly people and those with chronic illnesses or disabilities also continue to be prosecuted. The stress of criminal cases and the widely varying and often poor medical care provided in detention centres, prisons and labour camps often contribute to the worsening of their health (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2898), according to the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses

On 20 March 2025, Valery Semyonovich Baylo (born 1 November 1957), who suffered from chronic gastrointestinal and dental problems, died in hospital in Novorossiysk (<https://jw-russia.org/news/2025/03/240907.html>) after being transferred from the detention centre where he had been awaiting appeal. A court had jailed him in July 2024 for 2 years and 6 months. He is the first Jehovah's Witness to die while detained, Jehovah's Witness lawyers confirmed to Forum 18 on 28 March.

"My client's death was the result of criminal negligence and inaction on the part of the administration of Pretrial Detention Centre No. 3 in Novorossiysk in terms of failure to provide him with medical care," Baylo's lawyer claimed in a statement to the Investigative Committee on 21 March.

Of the 822 individuals who have faced prosecution since the 2017 nationwide ban:

- 180 have been sentenced to imprisonment by first-instance courts;
- 299 have received suspended sentences;
- 83 have been fined;
- 11 have been handed terms of "assigned labour".

Twenty-five people have had the charges against them dropped. Only one person has been acquitted and had the acquittal enter legal force. The rest remain under investigation or on trial.

Seventy-four of Russia's 83 federal subjects have seen prosecutions (not including Russian-annexed Crimea and Sevastopol).

Prosecutions usually begin with early-morning armed raids on people's homes. These have continued into 2025. Most recently, investigators raided at least four addresses in the Siberian city of Tomsk on 20 March. They arrested six people, and the next day had them placed in detention for two months. Similarly, on 22 February, Investigative Committee, FSB security service, and police officers raided homes in two towns in Altay Region. They seized Bibles and electronic devices and questioned four people, but later released them.

Russia is also imposing long prison terms on Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea, which it illegally occupied in 2014. Among recent sentences, on 14 January, a Russian-controlled court in Sevastopol jailed two Jehovah's Witnesses (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2956), Sergey Zhigalov and Viktor Kudinov, for six years each for organising the activities of a banned "extremist" organisation.

Kostroma: Second conviction and prison sentence

On 23 January, Kostroma's Sverdlovsk District Court convicted Dmitry Sergeyevich Terebilov (born 2 January 1980) for a second time on charges of "continuing the activities of a banned extremist organisation" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2917). Judge Dmitry Gorokhov found Terebilov guilty under both Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 and Part 2. He sentenced him to 5 years and 5 days' imprisonment in a strict-regime labour camp, to be followed by 2 years of restrictions on freedom and a 2-year ban on "activities related to participation in the work of religious associations".

Prosecutors had earlier requested a sentence of 10 years' imprisonment. On 7 February 2025, they filed an appeal attempting to have Terebilov's punishment increased to this.

(The judge sentenced Terebilov to 4 years and 6 months' imprisonment and 18 months' restrictions on freedom under Part 1.1, and 2 years and 6 months' imprisonment, plus 6 months of restrictions and a 2-year ban on participation in religious associations under Part 2. These punishments were partially added together to give the aggregate sentence, which also took into account the portion of Terebilov's earlier sentence which remained unserved on the date he was placed in detention for his second "extremism" trial.)

Terebilov is currently being held at Kostroma's Investigation Prison No. 1, where he spent the duration of the trial (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2917). His earlier 3-year prison sentence, which he had been serving at the strict-regime Correctional Colony No. 1, also in Kostroma, came to an end on 5 September 2024, but he was not released.

Terebilov – who pleaded not guilty – and his lawyer have lodged appeals against his latest conviction. These are likely to be heard in April, Jehovah's Witness lawyers told Forum 18 on 27 March 2025. Kostroma Regional Court's website has not yet registered the appeals.

"The only reason for [the initiation of the case] was the fact that the believer answered his cellmate's questions about Jehovah's Witness beliefs", the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses noted on its website on 21 June 2023, shortly after the new prosecution became known.

Although several other Jehovah's Witnesses have been subject to multiple prosecutions, these investigations and trials have generally overlapped. Terebilov appears to be the first person to be prosecuted for an incident unrelated to the activity which led to his first conviction, and which took place well after the conclusion of his previous case, when he was already imprisoned.

Judge Gorokhov took into account "the presence of dangerous recidivism in [Terebilov's] actions", Sverdlovsk District Court said in a press statement on 23 January, the day it convicted him.

Forum 18 wrote to Sverdlovsk District Court before the start of the working day on 24 March to ask:

– why does answering questions from a fellow inmate constitute involving another person in the activities of an extremist organisation?

– why did the judge find Terebilov guilty in the light of the amended Supreme Court sentencing guidelines (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2842) of October 2021 for cases under Criminal Code Article 282.2?

– why did the judge impose such a long jail term?

– who has been harmed by Terebilov's actions, and why is he considered dangerous?

Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Kostroma of 28 March.

"Recruiter"

According to the 23 January press statement, entitled "Recruiter" and posted on Sverdlovsk District Court website, Dmitry Terebilov "carried out preaching activities .. repeatedly holding conversations with convicted persons, using the Bible in a visual and demonstrative manner, [and] interpreted its content in accordance with previously studied prohibited literature developed by the governing bodies of the Jehovah's Witness religious organisation".

The court concluded that the religious teaching which Terebilov "propagated" was based on "the cult of the superiority of followers of this religious teaching over other persons, a negative assessment of persons who are not followers of Jehovah's Witness religious teaching, refusal to undergo military service in the armed forces of the Russian Federation, [and] the priority of the ideology of its teaching over other norms and laws established in society".

Terebilov testified in court that Roman Lazarev, the inmate he allegedly attempted to "recruit" to the Jehovah's Witnesses, had "himself expressed a desire to communicate with him and, as it turned out, kept an audio recording of all conversations starting from the very first one", the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses noted in its chronology of the case on 3 December 2024.

Lazarev himself testified that Terebilov "encouraged him to get rid of his bad habits", namely drinking alcohol and smoking.

It remains unclear whether Lazarev had been asking Terebilov questions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2917) out of genuine interest (and was then obliged to make recordings) or if the prison administration or investigative authorities had instructed, pressured, or bribed him to do so in the first place. The latter scenario is known to occur.

Use of 'Jehovah' "regarded as dissemination of 'Jehovah's Witness' religion"

After Dmitry Terebilov stopped receiving letters from friends and supporters which used the name "Jehovah" for God, he wrote to the labour camp administration on 1 September 2023, asking them "to clarify the rules for censoring incoming correspondence", according to court documents seen by Forum 18.

On 22 September 2023, Terebilov received a response from the labour camp head, Maksim Minchev, who stated that "while on the territory of the Russian Federation, including in a correctional institution, it is prohibited to practice the Jehovah's Witness religion, and members of the Jehovah's Witnesses can be held accountable for extremism under Article 282.2, Part 2 of the Criminal Code". Minchev also noted that it was prohibited to refer to God as "Jehovah" in correspondence.

Terebilov unsuccessfully took the labour camp to court (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2917) in an attempt to have this statement ruled unlawful.

Investigators used these letters, and Terebilov's personal diary, as "evidence of guilt", the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses noted on 25 January 2025 (<https://jw-russia.org/news/2025/01/251141.html>). The labour camp's censor testified in court that "There were no calls to incite hatred and enmity in the letters. There were no insults. All the letters were friendly", the Association added.

"What is criminal in sharing your thoughts about God, discussing some passage from the Bible, some scientific or historical fact?", Terebilov stated in court before his conviction, the Association noted in its chronology of the case on 3 December 2024.

In his final statement to the court, reported by the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses (<https://jw-russia.org/news/2025/01/251141.html>), Terebilov said: "I cannot understand what evil I have committed and to whom.

How can I understand what is allowed and what is not? The authorities say that my religion is not banned, I can practice it if there is no extremism in my actions, and there has never been. But law enforcement officials believe that whatever I do as a Jehovah's Witness is already a crime."

It is possible that Terebilov will also serve his new 5-year sentence (if it comes into legal force) at the same strict-regime labour camp where the administration stated that professing the Jehovah's Witness faith and using the name Jehovah is banned. Convicted persons may, however, be sent anywhere in the country.

Forum 18 wrote to Kostroma Region Prosecutor's Office before the start of the working day on 24 March to ask:

- why does answering questions from a fellow inmate constitute involving another person in the activities of an extremist organisation?
- why did prosecutors request such a long jail term?
- who has been harmed by Terebilov's actions, and why is he considered dangerous?

Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Kostroma of 28 March.

Terebilov's earlier jail terms

Dmitry Terebilov was imprisoned four times for drug-related offences as a young man. He was released early from his final five-and-a-half-year term in 2013 and joined the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2014. In 2017, with the support of Kostroma police, he had his post-imprisonment administrative supervision terminated early by Sverdlovsk District Court.

Terebilov started reading the Bible in prison while serving his final sentence on drug-related charges, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses commented on its website on 21 June 2023. This apparently brought about "positive changes in him", leading the labour camp administration to support his application for early release. "However, for the same Christian beliefs, Dmitry was sent to a maximum security colony", the Association noted.

Kostroma's Sverdlovsk District Court found Terebilov guilty under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participating in a banned extremist organisation") on 6 September 2021, and sentenced him to a 3-year term (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2684) in a strict-regime labour camp.

If a person is convicted of another offence while they still have an active criminal record (sudimost) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681), they are likely to be imprisoned under a harsher regime. He appealed unsuccessfully at Kostroma Regional Court on 12 January 2022.

Investigators had Terebilov's name added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) on 19 September 2019. This brings many financial consequences including the freezing of bank accounts except in the case of small transactions.

Terebilov spent most of his 3-year prison term at Labour Camp No. 1 in Kostroma (unusually, he served his sentence in his home town). He was transferred, however, to Kostroma's pre-trial detention centre in early 2024 for his second "extremism" trial.

"In the pre-trial detention centre, Terebilov has reported satisfactory conditions and food," Jehovah's Witness lawyers told Forum 18 on 27 March 2025. They noted, however, that he has been frequently transferred between cells, having to move on about ten occasions.

Terebilov has access to a Bible, and has had no problems with correspondence, including any which mentions the name Jehovah (unlike in Labour Camp No. 1). "The administration's attitude is positive, with many remembering him from previous cases", the lawyers added.

Vladivostok: Seven convicted, two imprisoned

One of the longest-running criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses came to an end on 3 February after more than seven years. Judge Galina Vasilkevich of Pervorechensk District Court, Vladivostok, found all seven defendants guilty of "continuing the activities of a banned extremist organisation".

The Judge handed Igor Lonchakov and Yury Redozubov long prison terms under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of the activities of a banned extremist organisation"). She handed Nina Astvatsaturova, Yelena Barmakina, Lyudviga Katanayeva, Yekaterina Treguba, and Yelena Tsorn suspended sentences under Part 2 ("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation").

Like hundreds of other Jehovah's Witnesses across Russia, their "organisation of" and "participation in the activities of a banned extremist organisation" consisted of praying together, singing religious songs, and reading and discussing the Bible.

"The prosecution accuses me of attending four religious meetings – not extremist, but religious in accordance with Article 28 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation – at which I glorify my God and perform sacred service to him, also support my fellow believers and receive support myself", Treguba said in her final statement to the court on 31 January. "I sincerely believe that attending religious meetings at which I study the Holy Scriptures more deeply, explore biblical principles, and try to live by them simply cannot be considered illegal."

In court on 18 December 2024, Katanayeva commented on the accusation of performing religious songs: "What was I singing about? For example, one of the songs was called 'Forgive Each Other' .. These are ordinary religious songs, part of the Christian tradition, and there is nothing extremist in their content and performance."

Lonchakov and Redozubov have lodged appeals against their convictions, Jehovah's Witness lawyers told Forum 18 on 27 March. These will be heard at Primorye Regional Court, but the court website does not yet list any hearings.

Primorye Region has the highest number of prosecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2922) of any federal subject in Russia. The region has seen a total of 23 separate criminal cases involving 58 individuals, of whom 10 have received prison terms in first-instance courts and 33 have received suspended sentences. One man is currently on trial, and a further 10 people have been charged and are awaiting a court date, while proceedings against another four have been suspended.

Prosecutions in Primorye include one of the earliest criminal cases security agencies initiated against Jehovah's Witnesses in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's liquidation of their organisations and nationwide ban on their activities. The case also involved some of the oldest known defendants (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2898).

The case against Nadezhda Anatolyevna Anoykina (born 11 January 1958), Lyubov Aleksandrovna Galaktionova (born 14 July 1942), Nailya Sunatovna Kogay (born 5 October 1951), Valentin Pavlovich Osadchuk (born 15 March 1976) Nina Ivanovna Purge (born 19 June 1940), Raisa Mikhailovna Usanova (born 28 September 1949), and Yelena Viktorovna Zayshchuk (born 25 August 1934) was initiated in April 2018 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571). They all received suspended sentences (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2747) on 1 June 2022, except for Zayshchuk, against whom proceedings were suspended because of her state of health.

Vladivostok: Prosecutors request long prison terms for all

In Vladivostok's Pervorechensk District Court on 31 January 2025, prosecutors asked Judge Galina Vasilkevich to hand down sentences of 9 years' imprisonment with 2 years of restrictions on freedom for Lonchakov and Redozubov, 5 years' imprisonment with 1 year of restrictions on freedom for Barmakina, Treguba, and Tsorn, and 4 years and 6 months' imprisonment with 1 year of restrictions on freedom for Astvatsaturova and Katanayeva.

Instead, Judge Vasilkevich imposed the following sentences:

- Igor Vladimirovich Lonchakov (born 26 December 1977) – 7 years' imprisonment;
- Yury Yuryevich Redozubov (born 12 February 1972) – 6 years and 6 months' imprisonment;
- Lyudviga Leonidovna Katanayeva (born 1 February 1967) – 3 years and 4 months, suspended; 3 years' probation;
- Yekaterina Viktorovna Treguba (born 17 February 1991) – 3 years and 4 months, suspended; 3 years' probation;
- Nina Nikolayevna Astvatsaturova (born 30 July 1959) – 3 years, suspended; 3 years' probation;
- Yelena Mikhailovna Barmakina (born 9 October 1967) – 3 years, suspended; 3 years' probation;
- Yelena Yuryevna Tsorn (born 24 October 1972) – 3 years, suspended; 3 years' probation.

Investigators had Barmakina added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) on 12 September 2020, Astvatsaturova, Katanayeva, and Tsorn on 2 July 2020, Treguba on 27 August 2020, and Lonchakov and Redozubov on 19 December 2022.

It is unknown whether prosecutors will appeal against the lesser sentences Judge Vasilkevich imposed. They usually do so, Jehovah's Witness lawyers told Forum 18 on 27 March 2025, but not always.

"It is impossible to find the logic of such a degree of rigidity in the court's decision [to impose jail sentences of more than the minimum term on Lonchakov and Redozubov]", Jehovah's Witness lawyers commented to Forum 18. They noted that the judge found no aggravating factors in the case, that the two men had no previous convictions, and that both have underage children and had positive character references. Lonchakov suffers from chronic illness, and his wife and mother also have disabilities.

"The vagueness of laws and freedom of interpretation allow courts to impose a very wide range of punishments on the same wording of the charges, simply on the basis of the subjective position of the judge and his curators [overseers] from other law enforcement agencies," the lawyers added.

All the defendants spent at least some of the duration of the investigation and trial under travel restrictions. Upon conviction, Lonchakov and Redozubov were taken into custody from the courtroom. They are currently awaiting appeal at Vladivostok's Investigation Prison No. 1. There they both have access to Bibles and can receive letters, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses noted in their chronology of the case on 7 March 2025.

Because of his chronic conditions, Lonchakov is "being held in the SIZO hospital in good conditions", the Association added. "The attitude of the administration and the prisoners is respectful."

Forum 18 wrote to Pervorechensk District Court before the start of the working day on 25 March to ask:

– why did the judge find the defendants guilty in the light of the amended Supreme Court sentencing guidelines (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2842) of October 2021 for cases under Criminal Code Article 282.2?

– why did the judge impose jail sentences on Lonchakov and Redozubov?

– who has been harmed by the defendants' actions, and why are they considered dangerous?

Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Vladivostok of 28 March.

[UPDATE 1 April 2025: Judge Nikolay Parfyonov, the acting chair of the court, responded on 1 April. "Deciding on the form and level of punishment for each of the defendants, the court took into account the nature and degree of public danger of the offences they committed, the character of the guilty persons, including the presence of mitigating circumstances, the influence of the imposed punishment on the correction of all the convicted persons, and the living conditions of their families", he explained.

"The very commitment of [the seven defendants] to the religious ideology of Jehovah's Witnesses, along with their consistent actions aimed at communicating [and] promoting awareness, consolidation and correct perception of religious texts, their meanings and other beliefs, to citizen P. [the FSB agent], who was not an adherent of the professed religion before meeting the defendants, testifies to the deliberate active participation of I.V. Lonchakov and Yu. Yu. Redozubov in organising the activities of [a banned extremist religious organisation]...since these actions are consistent with the principles of the organisation's activities, and that the defendants Ye. M. Barmakina, N. N. Astvatsaturova, Ye. V. Treguba, L. L. Katanayeva, [and] Ye. Yu. Tsorn consistently implemented the criminal intent that had arisen in them, aimed at participating in the activities of a religious association recognised as extremist."

"The local religious organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses was liquidated on the territory of the Russian Federation in order to protect citizens and the state from its illegal activities aimed at undermining the foundations of national unity, the interests of the Russian state, [and] its cultural and moral foundations", Judge Parfyonov added. "Significant funding of this organisation, including from foreign sources, contributes to the undermining of the culture of the Russian state."

Forum 18 also put the latter two questions to Primorye Region Prosecutor's Office, and asked why it had requested jail sentences for all seven defendants, and why such long sentences for Lonchakov and Redozubov. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Vladivostok of 28 March.

Vladivostok: Long-running criminal case

The case against the seven Vladivostok Jehovah's Witnesses began in the autumn of 2017, shortly after the Supreme Court's nationwide ban entered legal force. An "embedded FSB agent" started making covert recordings of worship services in Vladivostok, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses stated in its report on the trial (<https://jw-russia.org/news/2025/02/051048.html>) on 5 February 2025.

The Pervorechensk District Investigative Department opened a criminal case against Yelena Barmakina on 6 August 2019 (having already opened one in relation to her husband, Dmitry Barmakin, in July 2018). She was initially prosecuted separately from the others – who became the subjects of a group criminal case in the summer and autumn of 2020.

As Barmakina was appearing in court for her first trial, investigators were carrying out armed raids on the homes of her fellow

Jehovah's Witnesses in Vladivostok. At Yury Redozubov's house, officers with machine guns performed a four-hour search: "Electronic devices, a refrigerator magnet, a children's colouring book, and personal notes [were] confiscated from the believer", the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses noted in its chronology of the case on 9 July 2020.

On 28 September 2020, prosecutors requested a 3-year suspended sentence with 3 years' probation for Yelena Barmakina, but the next day, Judge Olga Barabash of Pervorechensk District sent her case back to prosecutors (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2698).

The judge decided that "it is not possible to establish from the text of the indictment the extremist nature of the defendant's actions in her religious activities – reading and discussing texts from the Bible, participating in the performance of religious chants and prayers, and watching video sermons – given that freedom of religion is a constitutional right .. it is not possible to establish what specific actions prohibited by the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, [or] where, when, and in what manner the defendant committed them, which is of significant importance for resolving the criminal case on the merits of the charge".

In August 2021, prosecutors added Barmakina to the case against Astvatsaturova, Katanayeva, Lonchakov, Redozubov, Treguba, and Tsorn. The group trial began at Pervorechensk District Court on 8 August 2022. Fifty-one hearings followed over the subsequent two and a half years, many of them delayed or adjourned.

During the trial, Barmakina observed that nothing had in fact changed in the indictment against her: "I am accused of the same actions as before: reading and discussing texts from the Bible .. participating in the performance of religious chants and prayers, and watching video sermons".

In court on 18 December 2024, Yekaterina Treguba stated that "As a Jehovah's Witness, I practice my religion by studying the Bible, discussing it with others, and trying to live in accordance with what is written in it. I believe that this is the essence of being a Christian".

Addressing the common accusation that Jehovah's Witnesses hold negative views of those with different beliefs, Nina Astvatsaturova told the court the same day that "I have never had a negative attitude towards people who profess other religions, because my Christian faith calls for love for all people, regardless of their religious affiliation.. I have never wanted to harm anyone with my actions, because I am a Christian and try to follow the commandments of Christ."

In November 2021, Yelena Barmakina's husband Dmitry Barmakin became the first Jehovah's Witness to be acquitted (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2698) since prosecutions began after the Supreme Court's 2017 ruling. This appeared to have been directly connected to new sentencing guidance for judges in extremism-related cases which the Supreme Court had issued the month before.

Prosecutors nevertheless had his acquittal overturned on appeal, and the court convicted Barmakin after a year-long retrial. The Judge handed him an 8-year prison sentence (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2842), which he is now serving in Samara Region, approximately 8,000km from Vladivostok. (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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