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KYRGYZSTAN: Up to 7 years' imprisonment for True and Free Adventist Pastor?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

65-year-old True and Free Reform Adventist Pastor Pavel Shreider faces a five to seven year jail term if a Bishkek court convicts him of incitement, charges he rejects. The trial resumes on 29 May. The NSC secret police arrested him in November 2024. Officers tortured him during interrogation, but his complaint to the National Centre for the Prevention of Torture was closed. Officers tortured with a stun gun church member Igor Tsoy to pressure him to implicate Pastor Shreider. He refused. At NSC behest, a court declared the Church "extremist".

On 17 April, five months after his arrest, the trial began of True and Free Reform Seventh-day Adventist Church Pastor Pavel Shreider. If convicted on charges of "incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious, or regional enmity" when "committed by a group of individuals", the 65-year-old faces a five to seven year jail term. The trial at a court in the capital Bishkek is due to resume on 29 May.

Pastor Shreider is denying all the charges in court. "There is not a single reference in the indictment to the persons in collusion with whom Shreider allegedly committed the mentioned crimes, and no references to any specific names," his lawyer Akmat Alagushev told Forum 18. "Also there is no concrete evidence of illegal actions Shreider allegedly committed in the media, on the internet or publicly or otherwise" (see below).

The National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Pastor Shreider at his home in Bishkek in November 2024. Officers searched his home and those of about 10 other church members. They seized thousands of books, including Bibles, as well as cash and mobile phones (see below).

NSC secret police officers tortured Pastor Shreider and another detained church member Igor Tsoy during interrogations. "I was given blows on my head, chest and given kicks in my spine from behind by five officers," Pastor Shreider wrote in a November 2024 complaint to the National Centre for the Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in Bishkek. Officers "hit me with an iron pipe to force me to confess that I committed crimes" (see below).

NSC secret police officers used a stun gun to try to coerce Tsoy to write a statement against Pastor Shreider, causing multiple injuries. However, Tsoy refused to do so (see below).

An official of the National Centre for the Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment claimed to Forum 18 that the Centre responded in writing in January to Pastor Shreider's complaint both to him in the prison and to his Lawyer. She declined to say what the response contained or whether the Centre had conducted its own investigation (see below).

Officials of the Centre told Pastor Shreider's daughter, Vera Shreider, in January that "it forwarded the complaint to Bishkek City Prosecutor's Office and that it received an answer that the claims of Shreider [about the torture] could not be corroborated" (see below).

Interior Ministry official Azim Kurmanbekov, who participated in the arrest of Pastor Shreider, claimed to Forum 18 he was "not aware" of the torture of the two men (see below).

Siymyk Bolotov, Investigator of Bishkek City Division of the NSC secret police, adamantly denied that he or other officers tortured Pastor Shreider and church member Tsoy during the investigations (see below).

Kanat Birimkulov, Deputy Prosecutor of Bishkek, endorsed the charges against Pastor Shreider on 25 December 2024 before the case was handed to the city's Birinchi May Court. Bishkek City Prosecutor's Office refused to put Forum18 through to him or to comment on the case (see below).

On 19 March, in a civil case opened by the NSC secret police and brought to court by Chuy Regional Prosecutor's Office, Alamudun

District Court declared the True and Free Seventh-day Adventist Church an "extremist" religious organisation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2979) and banned its activity throughout the country.

The regime has jailed others for exercising freedom of religion or belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2948). The 36-year-old Muslim prisoner of conscience Asadullo Madraimov has been jailed since October 2023 for criticising the authorities for closing Kara-Suu District's Al-Sarakhsi Mosque. Another member of the community, Mamirzhan Tashmatov, was freed from prison in May 2024. In July 2023, a court jailed Protestant Aytbek Tynaliyev for 6 months for allegedly "inciting religious enmity" for social media posts sharing his faith.

The authorities "since 2022 were looking into closing our Church and seeking any excuses"

The True and Free Reform Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kyrgyzstan is part of a reform movement within Adventism that emerged during the Soviet period. (It is separate from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with its headquarters in the United States.) One of its leaders, prisoner of conscience Vladimir Shelkov, died in a Soviet labour camp in 1980 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Shelkov).

The Church – which is led by Pastor Pavel Shreider - chooses not to seek state registration. Exercising freedom of religion or belief without state registration is illegal and punishable (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2961).

The authorities "since 2022 were looking into closing our Church and seeking any excuses", church members, who asked not to give their names for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in mid-May 2025. They noted a case brought in 2021 against two church members. "Allegedly under instructions of Pastor Shreider, they manipulated an old woman, another member of the Church, into selling them a house she owned."

Church members told Forum 18 that they believe the cases against Pastor Shreider and the Church were "fabricated". "Now the authorities have added the confiscated books to the false witness statements." They say the authorities are trying to link the current criminal case against Pastor Shreider with the 2021 case.

Pastor Shreider's arrest, multiple house searches

Officers of the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Pavel Davidovich Shreider (born 10 January 1960), Pastor of the True and Free Reform Seventh-day Adventist Church, at his home in Bishkek on 13 November 2024.

"At around 8 am my father was detained and handcuffed by NSC secret police officers when he exited the yard of our house into the street. Apparently they were waiting for him there," the Pastor's daughter, Vera Shreider, complained to Forum 18.

A team of nine officers, including Siymik Bolotov, NSC secret police Investigator, Azim Kurmanbekov, Interior Ministry senior operative as well as two officers of the Special Police Detachment, who were both masked and armed with automatic rifles, "rang the bell of our door and when we opened they entered with my father handcuffed. They pushed my father's head down as though he is some dangerous criminal. They did not allow my father to talk to us. 'It is a secret case,' they told us and prevented us calling our lawyer by immediately taking away all our phones. They also did not allow us to examine their identification documents."

Also on 13 November 2024, officers searched Shreider's Bishkek home. They then took him handcuffed to the village of Lenin in Alamudun District of Chuy Region, just north of the city, to the church's place of worship. There they conducted another search. The home belongs to Pavel Yantsen, Shreider's relative and a citizen of Kyrgyzstan.

The officers on the same day conducted searches in the homes of nine other church members in Bishkek. They confiscated in total more than 2,000 books, including nearly 200 by Ellen White, a founder of the Adventist faith, as well as more than 50 Bibles. Also confiscated were computers and other technical equipment, as well as cash and mobile phones, and the ownership documentation for five homes and two cars.

All confiscated items were returned later except for one mobile phone, which the NSC secret police officers claimed was "lost during the operation", as well as the books that were used as evidence in the case.

NSC secret police tortures Adventists

Vera Shreider and members of the True and Free Reform Adventist Church told Forum 18 that NSC secret police officers tortured Pastor Pavel Shreider and church member Igor Tsoy during interrogations.

On 13 November 2024, the day of his arrest, officers took Pastor Shreider to the NSC secret police building in Bishkek. "I was given blows on my head, chest and given kicks in my spine from behind by five officers," Pastor Shreider wrote in a 20 November 2024 complaint to the National Centre for the Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in Bishkek, seen by Forum 18. Officers also kicked him in the stomach and "hit me with an iron pipe to force me to confess that I

committed crimes".

NSC secret police officers invited medical workers after the torture of Pastor Shreider and "made them sign a paper that I had made no complaints to them".

On 13 November 2024, NSC secret police officers used a stun gun to try to coerce church member Tsoy to write a statement against Pastor Shreider, causing multiple injuries on his body. (Forum 18 has seen pictures showing injuries, taken the following day.) However, Tsoy refused to do so. He was released in the early hours of the following day.

"During the interrogation, the investigator called several operatives who started beating me with their hands," Tsoy told Forum 18. "Then they took me to another office, where they put a bag over my head and beat me with their hands, used a stun gun and choked me. All this was accompanied by swear words and threats to make things even worse for me and even to abuse me. They threatened to bring a gun."

After his release Tsoy asked the police to arrange a forensic medical examination. However the doctors who conducted the examination refused to give him the results. They later told him that the NSC secret police had come to take away the report.

Kyrgyzstan is a party to the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

(<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading>).

This defines torture as "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity."

Under the Convention, Kyrgyzstan is obliged both to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed, instigated or acquiesced to torture "or take other legal measures to ensure his [sic] presence", and also to try them under criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature".

An official (who did not give her name) of the National Centre for the Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment claimed to Forum 18 on 22 May that the Centre responded in writing on 8 January to Pastor Shreider's complaint both to him in the prison and to his Lawyer Aybek Omurov. (Akmat Alagushev took over as Pastor Shreider's lawyer in February.)

Asked what the official answer was and whether the Centre conducted its own investigation, the official declined to discuss this with Forum 18. "You can send us an email," she responded.

Vera Shreider told Forum 18 that in early January she visited the Centre and was told there that "it forwarded the complaint to Bishkek City Prosecutor's Office and that it received an answer that the claims of Shreider [about the torture] could not be corroborated".

Interior Ministry official Azim Kurmanbekov, who participated in the arrest of Pastor Shreider, refused to comment on the case on 15 May 2025. "I only accompanied the NSC officers in their operation. They arrested and questioned him," he told Forum 18. "I am not aware of it," he claimed when asked why Pastor Shreider and church member Igor Tsoy were tortured during interrogations.

Operative Kurmanbekov appears to have lied to Forum 18 since the Indictment includes in the list of evidence the records of questioning by him of Shreider and other Church members. When confronted, Kurmanbekov declined to talk further to Forum 18. "Please, talk to the NSC," he said.

Siymyk Bolotov, Investigator of Bishkek City Division of the NSC secret police, on 15 May adamantly denied that he or other officers tortured Pastor Shreider and church member Tsoy during the investigations. "You understand, I cannot discuss the case details with you over the phone. You need to call our Headquarters in Bishkek about this." He then declined further to talk to Forum 18.

The Officer who answered the phone of the NSC secret police headquarters in Bishkek on 15 May (who did not give his name) wrote down Forum 18's questions as to why the NSC secret police opened a criminal case and arrested Shreider and why it initiated the process of banning of the True and Free Reform Adventist Church as an extremist organisation. The Officer refused to answer the questions or to put Forum 18 through to any officials.

NSC secret police threats to confiscate Adventist-owned homes

Vera Shreider lamented to Forum 18 that the NSC secret police officers also threatened her father and Pavel Yantsen, who owns the

house where the Church met for worship, that their homes will be confiscated. "We will make sure that you lose everything," officers told them.

NSC secret police opens criminal case

The National Security Service (NSC) secret police opened the criminal case against Pavel Shreider on 1 November 2024 and investigated it. It brought charges against the pastor under Criminal Code Article 330, Part 2, Point 3. This punishes "Incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious, or regional enmity" when "committed by a group of individuals". Punishment is a five to seven year jail term.

Kanat Birimkulov, Deputy Prosecutor of Bishkek, endorsed the charges on 25 December 2024 before the case was handed to the city's Birinchi May Court.

Bishkek City Prosecutor's Office refused to comment on the case to Forum 18 on 21 May 2025. The duty official (who did not give her name) wrote down Forum 18's name and questions but refused to put it through to Prosecutor Birimkulov. She agreed to put it through to Prosecutor Aybek Japarov but he also refused to answer Forum 18's questions.

Multiple NSC secret police claims in the indictment

The indictment against Pastor Pavel Shreider (seen by Forum 18) was prepared and signed on 25 December 2024 by Alaibek Nurgazyev, Chief of the Investigation Department of Bishkek City Division of the NSC secret police, as well the NSC secret police Investigator Siymik Bolotov. It was endorsed by Prosecutor Kanat Birimkulov.

The indictment claims that "Shreider, being a citizen of the Russian Federation, having all the conditions for leading a normal life, being on the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic and being obliged to comply with the legislation of the host country, embarked on the path of committing a deliberate grave crime against the foundations of the constitutional order and state security under the following circumstances."

Vera Shreider and her father are indeed citizens of the Russian Federation. "I was born in Russia but we decided to move to Kyrgyzstan in 2013 since my father was born in Talas district of Kyrgyzstan and we as a family liked Kyrgyzstan," she told Forum 18. "We thought it was a good place for living and keeping our Christian morals."

The indictment reads that "Shreider, with all his unidentified criminal accomplices, knowing that the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic guarantees the equality of human and civil rights and freedoms regardless of race, nationality, attitude to religion, ethnicity, deliberately encroaching on the honour and dignity of citizens, including representatives of state power, their constitutional rights and freedoms, which they can use and protect regardless of national, ethnic or racial affiliation, conceived of inciting religious hatred to undermine the integrity and security of the state."

Vera Shreider told Forum 18 that "All they have as their proof are the two false witnesses that they use in this case and some Christian books that we used where there are some critical statements about Islam and other religions." She added that "my father has not done or said anything dishonouring the state authorities."

The indictment continues, "Shreider, being the head of an underground religious society called the 'Reformation Movement of World Union of True and Free Seventh-day Adventists', which conducted its activities based on independent doctrine with categorical religious nature and principles among the population of the Kyrgyz Republic, in particular in the city of Bishkek and Chuy Region, since 2013 to the present time, has illegally organised a religious cell based on the fundamentals of the Protestant Christianity, where he manipulated [church members], as well as through [religious] literature which manifests a negative-aggressive nature in relation to other religions."

"This underground group is not registered in Kyrgyzstan Republic as a religious organisation, and the books of this religious organisation have not been permitted by the State Commission for Religious Affairs," the indictment notes. (All religious literature needs to undergo state censorship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2961) before it can be distributed.)

(On 13 April 2025, President Sadyr Japarov renamed the State Commission for Religious Affairs – which controls religious activity (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2961) – the National Agency for Religious Affairs and Interethnic Relations.)

Judge Ayke Musayeva of Alamudun District Court of Chuy Region on 19 March, in a civil case opened by the NSC secret police and brought to court by Chuy Regional Prosecutor's Office, declared the True and Free Seventh-day Adventist Church an extremist religious organisation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2979) and banned its activity throughout the country.

"Shreider, together with his associates, determined where his organisation's members should work and who they should marry," the indictment adds. It said that "to convince his associates", Pastor Shreider gathered every Saturday "in an unregistered church" in the village of Lenin in Chuy Region. It noted that the place "is registered with government agencies as a private house where Shreider,

together with the unidentified leaders of the underground religious movement, taught religion using the [confiscated] literature."

The indictment adds: "According to the conclusion of the forensic religious and linguistic examination of the Justice Ministry experts, [the literature] promotes superiority, exclusivity of the adherents of the Adventist Church, and vice versa, inferiority, hostility, harmfulness of other religions and confessions, especially the Islamic religion, as well as Buddhism and Judaism."

It concludes: "This literature arbitrarily interprets canonical and ancient religious texts [Bible and Koran]. Shreider by his deliberate actions [usage of these books], committed a crime under Article 330, Part 2, Point 3 of the Criminal Code".

Contradictory "evidence" from two witnesses

Among the "evidence" against Pastor Shreider are records of police interrogations of Vladislav Selov and Pavel Klimovich, the two witnesses who wrote statements against Pastor Pavel Shreider.

Selov claims in his statement Pastor Shreider "instructed Church members to manipulate his grandmother to sell her house".

Klimovich also claims in his statement that his mother was "manipulated by Shreider and Igor Tsoy to sell her home to the Church".

Klimovich gave conflicting statements to Forum 18 about his statement to NSC secret police. Asked on 22 May 2025 why he complained against the Church to the authorities, he responded: "They are an extremist and secret organisation. I was a member of it and I left it."

Forum 18 noted that though the Church was not registered the authorities knew where they met and there was no secrecy about them, and asked Klimovich why he complained. "Well, you don't really know them, they have secret codes, and their law says that they must not be registered with the state. And they exalt themselves above other religions. They give false hopes to people that when they die they will go to heaven and have eternal life."

Forum 18 pointed out all Christian Churches teach about eternal life and refusal to register with the state does not violate his rights as a citizen. Klimovich then changed his statement, telling Forum 18, "Well my complaint is not mainly about that but that the Church manipulated my old mother to transfer the ownership of one of her flats to the Church."

Klimovich told Forum 18 that both his mother and 42-year old sister attend the Church. Asked why his sister did not complain about a possible "fraud", Klimovich claimed, "She has been brainwashed by that Church too." Asked why his brother, who according to him lives in Russia, did not complain about the case, "Well, he is busy and asked me to take care of this issue."

Klimovich then admitted to Forum 18 that he asked "a few more people to spy for me in the Church. They are at the moment recording conversations and filming the Church services and members. Soon there will be other criminal case against other members of the Church." He did not specify names of the targeted members or what charges might be brought. Asked whether he or the NSC secret police asked them to do so, he once again changed his statement. "No actually they are doing it of their own accord."

Klimovich then declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Church members told Forum 18 that Klimovich stopped attending the church when he was 13. They believe he became involved in gangs, and his mother sold the flat to pay off "bandits" who were demanding money from him.

Adventist Pastor's criminal trial begins in Bishkek Court

On 28 March 2025, the NSC secret police announced the raids and criminal case (without identifying Pastor Pavel Shreider) and the ban on the True and Free Seventh-day Adventist Church on its Instagram page.

Prosecutors handed the criminal case against Pastor Shreider under Criminal Code Article 330, Part 2, Point 3 ("Incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious, or regional enmity" when "committed by a group of individuals") to Bishkek's Birinchi May (Pervomaisky) District Court. In late April, the case was assigned to Judge Ubaydulla Satimkulov. The trial began with a preliminary hearing on 17 April, with the first substantive hearing on 16 May. It is due to resume on 29 May.

Pastor Shreider is denying all the charges in court. "There is not a single reference in the indictment to the persons in collusion with whom Shreider allegedly committed the mentioned crimes, and no references to any specific names," his lawyer Akmat Alagushev told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 22 May. "Also there is no concrete evidence of illegal actions Shreider allegedly committed in the media, on the internet or publicly or otherwise. There are no signs in the actions of Shreider of a crime provided for by Article 330 of the Criminal Code."

"I will thoroughly investigate the charges, claims of the parties and witnesses against and for the defendant," Judge Satimkulov insisted to Forum 18 on 14 May. Asked whether he will also investigate the torture of Pastor Shreider and other members of the

Church by NSC secret police officers during questioning for coercing confessions, he replied: "Let the defendant's lawyer petition the court about it." He declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Vera Shreider, daughter of the Pastor, participated in the first hearing on 16 May. "My impression was that the Judge was looking for any little proof to declare my father guilty," she told Forum 18. "We have to wait and see whether he will really thoroughly investigate the false claims of the NSC secret police and the two witnesses, one of whom, many believe, is an undercover police informant."

Pastor Shreider's 6 months in pre-trial detention

Since his arrest on 13 November 2024, Shreider has been kept for more than 6 months under NSC secret police supervision at an Interior Ministry Investigation Prison in Bishkek:

720005 Bishkek,

Oktyabr District,

Geologicheskii pereulok 2,

Uchrezhdenie No. 21 Ispolneniya Nakazaniy,

Pavel Davidovich Shreider

Vera Shreider visited her father in the Investigation Prison on 20 May and said he is "doing well physically", she told Forum 18. "He was examined medically by various doctors recently after our multiple calls to various authorities. The food in the prison is normal. He can read his Bible, which he keeps in his cell and is allowed to pray." She added that the family is allowed to bring him fresh food each day and medicines when needed.

The duty officer at the Investigation Prison put Forum 18 through to Nazgul Ashiraliyeva, Chief of its Special Detachment, on 20 May. Ashiraliyeva declined to discuss Pastor Shreider's case or conditions, but claimed that "We give necessary medical attention to all the prisoners." She declined to talk further. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kyrgyzstan
(<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&country=30>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711)

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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