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RUSSIA: More "extremist organisation" trial outcomes: suspended sentences, fines

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

While 28 Jehovah's Witnesses have been jailed since the Supreme Court's 2017 ban, 69 have received suspended sentences. This includes the oldest person convicted of "extremism" for exercising freedom of religion and belief: 80-year-old Boris Burylov, with a suspended sentence of two years and six months. Igor Turik, sentenced with him, received the longest suspended sentence: seven years. "A suspended sentence means that you need to live under stress for many years, and the sentence can be changed to a real one," a Jehovah's Witness lawyer noted.

Suspended sentences are now the most common form of punishment handed down to Jehovah's Witnesses found guilty of "organising" or "participating" in allegedly "extremist" activity such as continuing to meet for worship. Since the Supreme Court's 2017 ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses, 69 people have received suspended sentences either in first-instance courts or on appeal.

This figure includes the oldest person yet to be convicted of "extremism" for exercising their freedom of religion and belief: 80-year-old Jehovah's Witness Boris Burylov, who received a suspended sentence of two years and six months on 12 May. Burylov's 14-month long trial also resulted in the imposition of the longest known suspended sentence on a fellow defendant: Igor Turik received a seven-year suspended sentence.

Although these people have not been imprisoned, they must live under a range of restrictions, often for several years, and can be sent to prison if found guilty of another crime or repeated administrative offence – including offences that have no connection with their conviction for exercising freedom of religion and belief (see below).

Jehovah's Witness lawyers note that it is difficult to say whether it is better to receive a fine or a suspended sentence: "A fine means that you have to suffer materially right now," one told Forum 18. "A suspended sentence means that you need to live under stress for many years, and the sentence can be changed to a real one [i.e. the convicted person could be sent to prison]. Even lenient punishment is punishment, the consequences of which will be felt for years" (see below).

Valeriya Rayman and Sergey Rayman were given seven and eight year suspended sentences in October 2020. "Now we only cannot leave the town [Kostroma], and cannot change our place of residence," Sergey Rayman told Forum 18 on 16 June. "It turns out that there is no way we can visit our parents and relatives, who live in another region." He and Valeriya have to register with probation authorities once a month, and they have found it impossible to find jobs (see below).

Investigators can also have people added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" before they have been convicted or even charged. Banks are then obliged to freeze an individual's assets, blocking all but small transactions. Being added to the List leads to a variety of problems in everyday life, e.g. being unable to receive salaries, pensions, or benefits, renew insurance policies, or even purchase a phone SIM card (see below).

The mass prosecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia have been marked by the investigation, trial, and conviction of a significant number of older people. These individuals often have health conditions which Jehovah's Witnesses say have been exacerbated or triggered by the shock of raids on their homes, the stress of subsequent criminal investigations and, in a few cases, the poor conditions of pre-trial detention (see below).

Eleven Jehovah's Witnesses have received fines since the first (unrelated to the Supreme Court ban) in April 2019. They are among more than 470 Jehovah's Witnesses who remain under investigation, are on trial, or have been convicted as a direct result of the Supreme Court ruling of 2017, which liquidated as "extremist" the Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre and its subsidiary local religious organisations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297), and prohibited their activities (see below).

Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims who met to study the works of theologian Said Nursi have been sentenced to prison terms (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2663) ranging from two to eight years.

Targets

Sixty-five of Russia's 83 federal subjects have now seen criminal investigations of Jehovah's Witnesses, with the highest numbers of prosecutions in Primorye (36 people), the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region (23 people), and the Jewish Autonomous Region (23 people).

Muslims who meet to study the writings of Said Nursi may also be prosecuted under the Extremism Law for organising or participating in the activities of "Nurdzhular" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215). This organisation was banned as "extremist" in 2008, but Muslims in Russia deny any such formal organisation ever existed. Typically, such Muslims meet in homes to study Islam, with one or more expounding on Nursi's works. They also pray, eat, and drink tea together, and do not seek state permission to meet.

No trials are currently underway of Muslims who met to study Nursi's works. There have been no convictions for such meetings since a Krasnoyarsk court fined 24-year-old Andrei Rekst three months' average wages (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2426) in October 2018.

Four Muslims accused of meeting other Muslims to study Nursi's works are currently facing prosecution in the Tatarstan and Dagestan Republics (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2624).

Punishments

After being kept under FSB security service or police surveillance for some months, most targeted Jehovah's Witnesses, like Muslims who met to study Nursi's works, are prosecuted for "organising" (Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1), or "participating in" (Part 2), "the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity".

The activities prosecuted under both these parts of Criminal Code Article 282.2 are very similar, including meeting in each other's homes to pray and sing together, study sacred texts, and discuss shared beliefs.

Possible punishments are:

Part 1 – six to 10 years' imprisonment; or a 400,000 to 800,000 Rouble fine;

Part 2 – two to six years' imprisonment; a 300,000 to 600,000 Rouble fine; or one to four years' assigned work.

Several Jehovah's Witnesses have also been charged under Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing extremist activity"), apparently for continuing to collect donations for activities from fellow believers after the 2017 ban on Jehovah's Witness activity.

Possible punishments are: three to eight years' imprisonment; a 300,000 to 700,000 Rouble fine; or one to four years' assigned work.

Other charges have been brought against Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation").

Possible punishments are: four to eight years' imprisonment; a 300,000 to 700,000 Rouble fine; or two to five years' assigned work.

All the above prison terms may also be suspended, meaning that the convicted person does not have to serve the time in prison unless they are found guilty of another crime or repeated administrative offence. This includes offences unrelated to the activity which led to their original conviction. Judges can also impose a range of restrictions on freedom both during suspended sentences, and for certain periods after a person's release from imprisonment.

A fine of 300,000 Roubles represents about six months' wages for those in formal work at the average rate of pay across Russia. However, levels of pay vary widely from region to region. Such a fine represents about 20 months' pension for those on the average level of pension (see below).

Sentences

Since the first post-ban convictions in July 2019, there have been:

- 51 suspended sentences given to those convicted under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2;
- 15 suspended sentences given to those convicted under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1;
- 4 suspended sentences given to those convicted under Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1;

- and 2 suspended sentences given to those convicted under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1.

These figures add up to more than the total of individuals with suspended sentences, as several people were convicted under more than one Criminal Code Article or part of an Article.

Despite the similarities in the activities being prosecuted (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2624), trials have so far ended in a variety of sentences – from prison terms of several years, to suspended sentences of varying lengths, to a range of fines (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2662). There has also been one sentence of assigned work, later changed to a fine.

No one prosecuted has been acquitted (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2637) in cases relating to the 2017 nationwide ban on Jehovah's Witnesses (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297), though judges have returned some cases to prosecutors who later resubmit them. Defendants have sometimes succeeded in getting sentences reduced, or having cases sent for retrial on appeal, though no conviction has yet been overturned.

Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists"

Investigators and prosecutors may also have people added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists". Banks are then obliged to freeze an individual's assets, blocking all but small transactions (up to 10,000 Roubles) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215). Being added to the List leads to a variety of problems in everyday life, e.g. being unable to receive salaries, pensions, or benefits, renew insurance policies, or even purchase a phone SIM card.

Individuals can be added to the Rosfinmonitoring List when they are still under investigation, or on trial, or after they have been convicted and sentenced.

Suspended sentences

Courts have handed suspended sentences to 69 Jehovah's Witnesses. Some rulings have not yet entered legal force, as appeals are still pending.

While first-instance courts issued most of these sentences, appeal judges have decided in several cases to impose suspended sentences instead of initial fines, or, in one case, instead of a prison term.

Although receiving a suspended sentence means that the convicted person does not go to prison, it may "cripple their employment and financial options", as a Jehovah's Witness statement put it on 9 October 2020, through associated restrictions. It also puts those convicted at risk of imprisonment should they be found guilty of another crime or repeated administrative offence, including an offence with no connection to Jehovah's Witness activity.

When imposing a suspended sentence, a judge usually sets out three periods of time:

- the sentence itself, which is the time the defendant would serve if sent to prison;
- the probationary period (ispytatelnyy srok), which is the time during which any other conviction would send the defendant to prison (it is counted from the day the verdict comes into force and may be longer or shorter than the sentence itself, or of the same length);
- and a period of restrictions on freedom (ogranicheniya svobody), which runs concurrently with the probationary period but is not necessarily of the same duration.

According to Criminal Code Article 73 ("Suspended sentences"), restrictions may include:

- a night-time curfew;
- an obligation to inform probation authorities of any change in one's place of residence or work;
- a ban on visiting particular locations or travelling abroad;
- deprivation of the right to vote;
- and a bar on standing for election. (New legal amendments automatically ban standing for elections – see below.)

If any of these terms is breached, the probation period may be extended. If individuals are convicted of another crime, it is likely that

they will be imprisoned.

Time spent in a pre-trial detention centre is not taken into account when calculating the probationary period (but would be were the defendant later sent to prison).

If those convicted serve out the probationary period without incident, the conviction is spent (*sudimost gasitsya*) and they no longer have an active criminal record.

The Penal Enforcement Inspectorate (*Ugolovno-ispolnitelnaya inspektsiya*), a subdivision of the Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) is responsible (in cooperation with local Interior Ministry branches) for monitoring people serving suspended sentences, as well as those performing assigned work, and those under house arrest. The Inspectorate registers them, checks their compliance with the terms of their sentence, records any change of address, and may visit them at home with local police.

Living with suspended sentences

Jehovah's Witness lawyers note that it is difficult to say whether it is better to receive a fine or a suspended sentence: "A fine means that you have to suffer materially right now," one told Forum 18. "A suspended sentence means that you need to live under stress for many years, and the sentence can be changed to a real one [i.e. the convicted person could be sent to prison]. Even lenient punishment is punishment (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2619), the consequences of which will be felt for years."

Some Jehovah's Witnesses have now been living with suspended sentences for several months. Gennady Valerianovich Shpakovsky (born 6 October 1958) received a suspended sentence of six years and six months on 3 August 2020 at Pskov Regional Court. Pskov City Court had originally sentenced him to six and half years in prison (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2578) on 9 June 2020.

"Everything is peaceful with us," Shpakovsky's wife Tatyana Shpakovskaya told Forum 18 on 14 June 2021. "Gennady goes to register with the police twice a month. From 10pm until 6am he cannot leave the house. Once, the police came at night to check whether he was at home. But so far, there have been no more problems."

Valeriya Aleksandrovna Rayman (born 21 May 1993) and Sergey Alekseyevich Rayman (born 5 October 1996) were convicted on 9 October 2020, and given the then-longest suspended sentences yet of seven and eight years respectively (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2620) at Sverdlovsk District Court in Kostroma. (Since then, Igor Turik received a seven year suspended sentence at Industrial District Court in Perm on 12 May 2021 - see below.)

At an appeal hearing on 26 February 2021, Kostroma Regional Court dropped the charge against the Raymans of "organising" allegedly "extremist" activities under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. The court also reduced the Raymans' sentences to two years for Valeriya, and three years for Sergey.

The appeal judge also reduced the Raymans' probationary period from five years to two years, and their periods of restrictions on freedom from two years for both to nine months for Sergey and six months for Valeriya. The judges also overturned the ban on leadership of or participation in religious organisations. Jehovah's Witness literature seized from their home during the investigation – which the first-instance court had ruled should be confiscated – was also ordered returned to them.

This remains the only appeal against a suspended sentence to result in any reduction in punishment or any dropping of charges.

"Now we only cannot leave the town [Kostroma], and cannot change our place of residence," Sergey Rayman told Forum 18 on 16 June. "It turns out that there is no way we can visit our parents and relatives, who live in another region." He added that he and Valeriya have to register with probation authorities once a month, and that they have found it impossible to find jobs.

There is no legal bar on employment for a person with a suspended sentence or active criminal record (*sudimost*) except in certain sectors. These include the military, law enforcement, the civil service, aviation, transport security, any work with children, and – for those convicted of economic crimes – the financial sector. Employers may, however, ask about an applicant's criminal record and have their own policies on the matter.

"A person answers honestly on the [employer's] application form, and for many, that is enough," the Raymans' lawyer Yevgeniya Shemberger told Forum 18 on 18 June. She emphasised that there is nothing in law which should prevent a convicted person from getting most jobs. "After all, they should be able to support themselves financially".

Election ban

On 4 June 2021, President Vladimir Putin signed into law amendments to the laws on electoral rights and elections to the State Duma. These bar virtually anyone recently involved in an organisation which has been banned as an "extremist" or terrorist

organisation from standing for election.

For people who were founder members, members of the governing body, leaders or deputy leaders, or heads or deputy heads of structural subdivisions in the three years before their organisation was banned, the prohibition on standing for election will last for five years.

For people who were participants, members, employees or otherwise "involved in the activities" of the organisation in the year before it was banned, the prohibition will last for three years.

Unlike Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses do not in any country stand for election or vote in elections.

Oldest person to be convicted

The mass prosecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia have been marked by the investigation, trial, and conviction of a significant number of older people. These individuals often have health conditions which Jehovah's Witnesses say have been exacerbated or triggered by the shock of raids on their homes, the stress of subsequent criminal investigations, and in a few cases, the poor conditions of pre-trial detention (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571).

The oldest person yet convicted is 80-year-old Boris Ivanovich Burylov (born 8 April 1941), who received a suspended sentence of two years and six months on 12 May 2021. The court also handed down ten months of restrictions on freedom.

The oldest person and only woman to receive a prison term is 70-year-old Valentina Ivanovna Baranovskaya (born 8 April 1951), who was in February 2021 jailed by Abakan City Court for two years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2662) to punish her for meeting fellow Jehovah's Witnesses for worship. Her 46-year-old son Roman Baranovsky was jailed in the same trial for six years.

Burylov's 14-month long trial also resulted in the imposition of the longest known suspended sentence on a fellow defendant. Igor Valeryevich Turik (born 25 June 1968) received a seven year suspended sentence (see below).

Prosecutors had requested a seven-year prison sentence in a general-regime labour camp. Burylov will be on probation for three years. He had been charged with "organising" allegedly extremist activity under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1, but the judge at Industrial District Court in Perm changed the charge to "participating in" such activity under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2.

Forum 18 wrote to the Perm Region Prosecutor's Office on 18 June, asking why prosecutors had requested such long prison sentences, especially for the 80-year-old Burylov, why collective prayer and Bible study were deemed criminal offences, and who had been harmed by the five men's activities.

In her reply of 23 June (see below), Yelena Shkarednaya of the Criminal Justice Department of Perm Region Prosecutor's Office noted that the defendants had organised or participated in the activities of "a religious association in relation to which a Supreme Court decision has entered into legal force regarding its liquidation and a ban on its activities in connection with extremist activity", and therefore they were prosecuted not for their religious beliefs, but for "actions aimed at continuing the activities of a religious organisation liquidated as extremist by a decision of a court". She did not respond on what harm the men's activity might have caused anyone.

"I can say with complete confidence that this religious group [which met for prayer and Bible study] had no goal of continuing the activities of the legal entities banned by the Supreme Court," Burylov said in his final speech to the court. "There was no evil or criminal intent at all .. There were no material or selfish aims .. There were no negative consequences for citizens or society. On the contrary, those who came to these meetings behaved in a peaceful and friendly way, [and] none of them said a bad word against any religion, any branches of government, or anyone else."

Deaths

Courts have handed suspended sentences to a further six people in their 70s and five in their 60s. Another man – Viktor Ivanovich Malkov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2571) – died at the age of 61 shortly after his case reached court. His three fellow defendants all received suspended sentences.

Six Jehovah's Witnesses have died since 2017 after being charged or named as suspects in criminal cases, including Rimma Mikhailovna Vashchenko (17 August 1930 – January 2021), the oldest person to be prosecuted. Most recently, Kaleriya Fyodorovna Mamykina (18 April 1941 – June 2021) died of Covid-19 before receiving compensation for the criminal case against her, which investigators closed in November 2019 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2624).

Longest known suspended sentences

After the reduction of the Raymans' sentences on appeal, the current longest known suspended sentence is that handed down on 12 May to Igor Valeryevich Turik (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2512) (born 25 June 1968). He was charged under both Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 and Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1, and received a seven-year suspended term in the same trial as Boris Burylov at Industrial District Court in Perm. Turik was also given a four-year probationary period, and a five-year ban on occupying leadership roles in religious associations, as well as 18 months' restrictions on freedom.

Their fellow defendants – Aleksandr Valeryevich Inozemtsev (born 13 July 1972), Viktor Aleksandrovich Kuchkov (born 28 June 1967), and Yury Vladimirovich Vaag (born 21 August 1975) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2512) – all received suspended sentences of two years and six months, with three years' probation and ten months of restrictions on freedom, under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2.

Prosecutors had requested a sentence of nine years' imprisonment for Turik, seven years for Burylov and Kuchkov, and four years for Inozemtsev and Vaag.

Forum 18 wrote to the Perm Region Prosecutor's Office on 18 June, asking why prosecutors had requested such long prison sentences, why collective prayer and Bible study were deemed criminal offences, and who had been harmed by the five men's activities. Yelena Shkarednaya of the Criminal Justice Department of Perm Region Prosecutor's Office replied on 23 June that Turik had been prosecuted not for his religious beliefs, but for "actions aimed at continuing the activities of a religious organisation liquidated as extremist by a decision of a court", including "financial services knowingly aimed at supporting the activities of an extremist organisation".

In his final speech to the court, Turik, who worked as a photographer and architectural designer, described how the prosecution had already affected his life. After local TV news showed footage of the FSB security service's raid on his home and of the subsequent court proceedings, he lost his main customers "and, accordingly, my earnings", the jw-russia.org website stated on 12 May.

As a result of his inclusion on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" – to which he and his fellow defendants were added on 21 February 2019 – Turik has been unable to use his bank cards or obtain car insurance.

After Turik's sentence, the next longest known suspended terms are the six years and six months handed down to:

- Yekaterina Gennadyevna Pegasheva (born 4 September 1989), Mari El Republic, on 31 May 2021;

- Ruslan Nikolayevich Korolyov (born 8 August 1982) and Valery Anatolyevich Shalev (born 23 September 1977), Smolensk, 23 April 2021;

- and, on appeal on 3 August 2020, Gennady Valerianovich Shpakovsky (born 6 October 1958), Pskov.

Forum 18 wrote to the Smolensk Region Prosecutor's Office on 18 June and Mari El Republic Prosecutor's Offices on 21 June, asking why collective prayer and Bible study were deemed criminal offences, and who had been harmed by the activities of the accused. Forum 18 had received no replies by the end of the working day of 23 June.

Longest known probationary periods and periods of restrictions on freedom

Probationary periods (during which any other offence may send a person to prison) and periods of restrictions on freedom arguably have a greater immediate and material effect on convicted people's lives than the length of their suspended sentences.

Restrictions on freedom can mean, among other things, that the convicted person cannot leave their home town at any time, or their home at night.

The longest known probationary period for convicted Jehovah's Witnesses is five years, imposed on:

- Yury Alekseyevich Krutyakov (born 16 July 1952), Moscow Region, on 24 May 2021;

- Grigory Gennadyevich Bubnov (born 4 September 1965), Nadezhdinsky District Court, Primorye on 21 January 2020. He is also subject to a five-year ban on involvement in public organisations, and a one-year ban on attending public events;

- and Ruslan Nikolayevich Korolyov (born 8 August 1982) and Valery Anatolyevich Shalev (born 23 September 1977), Promyshlenny District Court, Smolensk on 23 April 2021. Both received four-year bans on holding positions of responsibility in religious organisations, as well as one year of general restrictions on freedom.

Fines

Only one Jehovah's Witness has received a fine since November 2020. Minusinsk City Court in Krasnoyarsk Region fined Dmitry

Anatolyevich Maslov (born 7 September 1976) 450,000 Roubles under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 on 2 June 2021.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses who receive fines do not have to go to prison and are no longer considered to have an active criminal record (sudimost) only one year after they pay the fine, the financial impact of such punishments can be considerable. Many Jehovah's Witnesses who are prosecuted lose their jobs, either because they are sacked or because being in detention or under house arrest (or even just a night-time curfew or travel restrictions) means that they cannot work.

The nationwide average monthly salary before tax for those in work was 51,351 Roubles in 2020, according to the Federal State Statistical Service. Salaries can vary widely, however, both between and within regions. In the capital city of Moscow, the average pre-tax salary in 2020 was 100,070 Roubles per month. In the Nenets Autonomous Region (among several regions of northern Russia where many people work in the well-remunerated natural resources sector) it was 92,237 Roubles – while in the central regions of Oryol and Ivanovo monthly pay was 31,862 and 29,082 Roubles respectively. In Dmitry Maslov's home region of Krasnoyarsk, it was 53,814 Roubles.

Many other Jehovah's Witnesses who have been prosecuted are pensioners, either because of their age or a disability. The average state pension in Russia in 2020 was 15,059 Roubles per month.

Pensioner Anatoly Mikhailovich Tokarev (born 31 December 1958) was fined 500,000 Roubles on 23 October 2020 and appealed unsuccessfully on 14 January 2021. In Kirov Region, where he lives, the average monthly pension is 16,029 Roubles as of January 2021 (according to the Kilmez District Administration website). The jw-russia.org website notes that Tokarev still works as a kindergarten caretaker. Caretakers in Kirov earn an average monthly salary of 14,094 Roubles, according to Russian jobs website trud.com.

Prisoners of conscience

Twenty-eight Jehovah's Witnesses have been sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to seven and a half years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2662) as a direct result of the 2017 Supreme Court ban on their activities.

Two other Jehovah's Witnesses have been convicted of "continuing the activities" of the local Jehovah's Witness religious organisation in Oryol, which was liquidated as "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2228) in 2016, before the nationwide ban. One of them - Danish citizen Dennis Christensen - was given a six year prison term in February 2019 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2479). The other, Sergey Skrynnikov, was fined about 18 months' average local wages (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2480) in April 2019.

At present, only one Muslim who met with other Muslims to read Nursi's works remains imprisoned - Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev (born 16 February 1977). A court in Dagestan sentenced him in May 2018 to eight years' imprisonment plus two years of restrictions on freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2386) for alleged involvement in "Nurdzhular".

Another Muslim, Yevgeny Kim, who met others to study Nursi's writings, was sentenced to three years and nine months' imprisonment in June 2017. In January 2019, he was stripped of his Russian citizenship, and was immediately placed in a detention centre for foreign and stateless persons upon his release in April 2019. He has remained there ever since (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2663), as his birthplace of Uzbekistan refuses to accept him.

Courts in Russia's illegally annexed (<https://www.nhc.no/en/qa-breaches-of-international-law-and-human-rights-issues-2/>) territories of Crimea and Sevastopol have also sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims to imprisonment (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2648) for exercising their freedom of religion and belief. (END)

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

For more background see Forum 18's survey of the general state of freedom of religion and belief in Russia (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246), as well as Forum 18's survey of the dramatic decline in this freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <https://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1468)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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