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## **RUSSIA: 200 people on criminal trial for exercising freedom of religion or belief**

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

*Nearly 200 Jehovah's Witnesses and 9 Muslims who study Said Nursi's writings are on criminal trial for exercising freedom of religion and belief. Since June, courts jailed 17 Jehovah's Witnesses for "organising" or "participating in" banned communities. "I still do not understand what my crime is," Yelena Nikulina told a Saransk court. "There are no victims in our case, but there are still injured parties – and they are in front of you, in the dock!" The court jailed her and her husband for 4 years, 2 months.*

Nearly 200 Jehovah's Witnesses and 9 Muslims who meet to study the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi are currently on criminal trial on charges of "continuing the activities" of organisations which Russian courts have banned as "extremist". If convicted, they could be imprisoned for up to a decade, spend years under the multiple restrictions of a suspended sentence, or pay fines of up to one year's average wage.

Jehovah's Witnesses are still facing criminal conviction and possible imprisonment for exercising their freedom of religion and belief in spite of the issuance, in October 2021, of amended guidance for judges in extremism-related cases (see below).

Since the beginning of June 2022, courts have handed prison sentences to 17 people for "organising" or "participating in" the activities of banned Jehovah's Witness communities (see below). Courts have handed many others suspended sentences (still the most common form of punishment) or fines.

Investigators and prosecutors tend not to name any "victims" in criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses, despite the fact that in most instances, they consider defendants dangerous enough to seek long prison sentences. "The courts are called to fight crime, but I still do not understand what my crime is," Yelena Nikulina told Lenin District Court in Saransk on 15 August. "There are no victims in our case, but there are still injured parties – and they are in front of you, in the dock!" The court jailed her and her husband for 4 years and 2 months each (see below).

Forum 18 wrote to the Prosecutor's Offices which lodged the cases and the courts which considered them, asking why the defendants had been convicted in light of the Supreme Court's amended guidance, in what way they could be considered dangerous, and why such long sentences – up to seven years – had been sought. Forum 18 received only one reply, not answering the questions but directing Forum 18 to the court website.

In the five years since the Supreme Court in 2017 ordered Jehovah's Witness organisations to be liquidated as "extremist" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2297](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297)) and outlawed their activities, investigators have opened criminal cases against more than 600 individuals, in 71 of Russia's 83 federal subjects (not counting Russian-annexed Crimea and Sevastopol), according to figures from the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Since the 2017 ban, first-instance courts have convicted more than 230 Jehovah's Witness defendants and acquitted only two (of whom one is now undergoing a re-trial after prosecutors appealed). Of those convicted, 73 have received prison terms ranging from one to eight years.

The Supreme Court's new guidelines direct judges to ascertain a defendant's "specific actions", their motivation, and "the significance [of these actions] for the continuation or resumption of a [banned organisation]'s activities". The October 2021 amendments ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2698](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2698)) also note that a person's actions "consisting solely of the exercise of their right to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion [...] do not in themselves constitute a crime under Article 282.2, Part 2, if they do not contain signs of extremism". So far, this has had a noticeable, but limited, impact on sentencing ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2747](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2747)).

"Despite the fact that the [Supreme Court] issued a ruling in defence of the right of Jehovah's Witnesses to hold worship services and joint religious rites and ceremonies, the persecution of believers in the country is not stopping," the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses commented on 6 September.

"It is necessary to understand that every region and even every court in Russia has its own practice," Jehovah's Witness lawyers added to Forum 18 on 14 September. "In general, almost all courts in Russia, despite the Plenum's explanation, find Jehovah's Witnesses guilty, but impose different punishments. This is the essence of different practices. Everyone is guilty, but the punishment is different everywhere."

The most recent conviction of a Muslim for "continuing the activities" of "Nurdzhular" (which Muslims in Russia deny has ever formally existed) was that of Nakiya Sharifullina in Tatarstan in August 2021. She appealed unsuccessfully at the cassational level in August 2022, and is currently serving 18 months' probation on a two-year suspended sentence (see below).

The full trial of six Moscow residents accused of leading and participating in a "Nurdzhular" cell in the capital began at Kuzminsky District Court on 22 September ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2769](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2769)). The next hearing is due on 28 September.

Three men are in court on similar charges in Naberezhnyye Chelny in Tatarstan. Their next hearing is due on 27 September at the City Court. A further three are awaiting trial in the Tatar capital Kazan (see below).

The Moscow and Tatarstan trials are the first in which judges should take into account the Supreme Court's amended guidance in considering cases against Muslims who met to study Nursi's writings, Forum 18 notes.

The FSB security service in Novosibirsk has restarted its investigation of Imam Ilkhom Merazhov ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2778](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2778)). It initially opened the investigation in 2017 as part of a criminal case against several Novosibirsk Muslims ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2391](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2391)) accused of "continuing the activities" of "Nurdzhular", but suspended it after Merazhov left Russia. It is unclear why the FSB security service is pursuing the case again while Merazhov remains outside the country.

#### Charges and punishments

Russia's Supreme Court banned "Nurdzhular" (derived from the Turkish for "Nursi followers") as "extremist" in 2008 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), but Muslims in Russia deny any such formal organisation ever existed. No centralised or local religious organisation associated with Nursi's teachings was registered in Russia before the ban.

The Supreme Court ordered the liquidation as "extremist" of all registered Jehovah's Witness organisations ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2297](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297)) in 2017, and outlawed their activities.

After being kept under FSB security service or police surveillance for some months, most targeted Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of Nursi's works are prosecuted under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)) for either "organising" (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 manifestations of freedom of religion and belief for which Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims are prosecuted under both these parts of Criminal Code Article 282.2 are similar. They include meeting in each other's homes to pray and sing together, study sacred texts, and to discuss shared beliefs.

There is a wide range of compulsory and discretionary punishments – including post-imprisonment punishments ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)) - for convictions under Criminal Code Article 282.2. Some Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims have also faced charges under Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing extremist activity"), as well as under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation"), for which there is a similarly wide range of compulsory and discretionary punishments ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)).

These punishments vary depending on the articles ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)) under which a conviction takes place, and whether a sentence is a prison sentence, suspended prison sentence, fine, or assigned work sentence ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)). Such punishments include bans on holding certain positions and/or carrying out certain activities, restrictions on freedom, and administrative supervision ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)).

The state of "sudimost" (having an active criminal record, the state of being a convicted person) also brings with it formal penalties and informal obstacles to life ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)), as does being on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) which among other consequences blocks their access to any bank accounts they might have. Almost everyone investigated or convicted on extremism-related charges is placed on the Rosfinmonitoring List.

People convicted on extremism-related charges are also barred from a wide range of occupations and activities ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)). These include standing for election (this ban also covers people employed by or otherwise involved in "extremist" organisations, even if never prosecuted), and working in the aviation industry.

Jehovah's Witnesses still being convicted and jailed

Despite the Supreme Court's October 2021 amended guidance ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2698](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2698)), five criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses have ended in prison sentences for 17 individuals since the beginning of June 2022. Their prison terms range in length from two years under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 to seven years under Part 1. (Two other defendants received suspended sentences in the same court proceedings.)

In Gukovo, Rostov Region (City Court, 21 September):

Aleksey Valeryevich Dyadkin (born 6 May 1989), Nikita Valeryevich Moiseyev (born 26 March 1990), Vladimir Nikolayevich Popov (born 17 January 1967), and Yevgeny Viktorovich Razumov (born 26 December 1979), all Part 1 – 7 years' imprisonment; 5-year ban on participation in public organisations; 1 year's restrictions on freedom; added to Rosfinmonitoring List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 17 September 2020;

Aleksey Vladimirovich Gorely (born 27 August 1980) and Oleg Grigoryevich Shvidkovsky (born 25 February 1969), both Part 1 – 6 years and 6 months' imprisonment; 5-year ban on participation in public organisations; 1 year's restrictions on freedom; added to Rosfinmonitoring List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 17 September 2020.

In Vologda (City Court, 5 September; appeal lodged but not yet heard):

Nikolay Aleksandrovich Stepanov (born 1974), Part 1 – 4 years' imprisonment; 3-year ban on leadership of public organisations; 1 year's restrictions on freedom; not on Rosfinmonitoring List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687));

Yury Vladimirovich Baranov (born 1952), Part 1 – 4 years, suspended, with a 4-year probationary period; 3-year ban on leadership of public organisations; 1 year's restrictions on freedom; not on Rosfinmonitoring List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)).

In Saransk, Republic of Mordoviya (Lenin District Court, 25 August; appeal lodged but not yet heard):

Vladimir Andreyevich Atryakhin (born 29 September 1987), Part 1 – 6 years' imprisonment; 4-year ban on leadership of and participation in religious organisations; 1 year's restrictions on freedom; added to Rosfinmonitoring List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 11 April 2019;

Georgy Nikolayevich Nikulin (born 21 November 1963) and Yelena Anatolyevna Nikulina (18 August 1968), Part 1.1 and Part 2 – 4 years and 2 months' imprisonment; 1 year and 2 months' restrictions on freedom; added to Rosfinmonitoring List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 11 April 2019;

Aleksandr Stanislavovich Shevchuk (born 31 August 1989), Aleksandr Yevgenyevich Korolyov (born 20 September 1978), and Denis Nikolayevich Antonov (born 17 December 1976), Part 2 – 2 years' imprisonment; 6 months' restrictions on freedom; added to Rosfinmonitoring List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 11 April 2019.

In Krasnoyarsk (October District Court, 27 June; appeal lodged but not yet heard):

Yevgeny Nikolayevich Zinich (born 17 April 1966), Part 1 – 6 years' imprisonment; 2-year ban on organisational activities in public and religious organisations; 1 year's restrictions on freedom; added to Rosfinmonitoring List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 3 August 2021.

In Chita, Zabaykalsky Region (Central District Court, 6 June; unsuccessful appeal, 20 June):

Vladimir Vladimirovich Yermolayev (born 12 October 1988) and Aleksandr Nikolayevich Putintsev (born 20 January 1974) – 6 years and 6 months' imprisonment; 6-year ban on leadership in public organisations; 1 year and 6 months' restrictions on freedom; added to Rosfinmonitoring List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 22 September 2021;

Igor Rafitovich Mamalimov (born 25 November 1976) – 6 years' imprisonment; 6-year ban on leadership in public organisations; 1 year's restrictions on freedom; added to Rosfinmonitoring List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 22 September 2021;

Sergey Nikolayevich Kirilyuk (born 4 April 1972) – 6 years suspended; 4 years and 6 months' probation; 6-year ban on leadership activities in public organisations; 1 year's restrictions on freedom; added to Rosfinmonitoring List

([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 22 September 2021.

Forum 18 wrote to the Prosecutor's Offices which lodged the cases and the courts which considered them, asking why the defendants had been convicted in light of the Supreme Court's amended guidance, in what way they could be considered dangerous, and why such long sentences – up to seven years – had been sought. Forum 18 received only one reply by the end of the working day of 26 September, not answering the questions but directing Forum 18 to the court website.

"There are no victims in our case, but there are still injured parties – and they are in front of you, in the dock!"

Investigators and prosecutors tend not to name any "victims" in criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses, despite the fact that in most instances, they consider defendants dangerous enough to seek long prison sentences.

This is a point made by several of the defendants themselves. "The courts are called to fight crime, but I still do not understand what my crime is," Yelena Nikulina told Lenin District Court in Saransk on 15 August. "There are no victims in our case, but there are still injured parties – and they are in front of you, in the dock!"

Her husband Georgy Nikulin noted in his final speech: "It turns out that I am on trial not because I committed some real crime and am therefore dangerous to society. I am subject to criminal prosecution only because I am a Christian, a Jehovah's Witness."

The Nikulins and their four fellow defendants were taken into custody from the courtroom on 25 August and are awaiting their appeal at Saransk's Investigation Prison No. 1. The Supreme Court of the Republic of Mordoviya has not yet listed any appeal hearings.

Olga Ionova, Acting Chair of Lenin District Court, responded on 14 September to Forum 18's enquiry about the case by directing Forum 18 to the court's online press statement and Judge Yelena Simonova's written verdict, which she said would be published on the court website after it entered legal force.

The court's 12 September press release states that, despite knowing of the 2017 Supreme Court ban on Jehovah's Witness activity, Vladimir Atryakhin, "having the opportunity to satisfy his spiritual needs independently and exercise the right to freedom of profession of Jehovah's Witness religious teachings .. deliberately undertook active organisational measures in order to continue the illegal activities of the extremist [Saransk Jehovah's Witness community], in fact continuing the statutory activities of the liquidated legal entity". The other five defendants had participated in these activities, the statement added, while the Nikulins had also involved another person.

"In imposing punishment on the convicts, the court took into account the nature and degree of social danger of the crimes committed, the character of the perpetrators, [and] mitigating circumstances, as well as the impact of the punishment on their correction, and came to the conclusion that achieving the aim of punishment is possible only by isolating the convicts from society."

Investigators detained Atryakhin, Nikulin, and Shevchuk during raids on nine Jehovah's Witness homes in Saransk on 6 February 2019 and kept them in custody for 50 days, 147 days, and 147 days respectively (the other three defendants were apparently not placed under any restrictions). It was another two years before the suspects were officially charged.

"I have always been a law-abiding citizen.. But suddenly, I became a criminal"

Nikolay Stepanov and Yury Baranov's case came to an end more than two and half years after it began with early-morning raids on Jehovah's Witness homes in Vologda on 19 December 2019, during which the men were arrested.

Stepanov spent eight months in detention, followed by 43 days under house arrest, before being released under a ban on specific activities in September 2020. Investigators placed Baranov under house arrest for 88 days in his one-room flat with his 94-year-old disabled mother, after which he was released, firstly under a ban on specific activities, then under travel restrictions from May 2020.

"Over the past 26 years, since I became a Jehovah's Witness, I have always been a law-abiding citizen, and nothing changed in my views and behaviour after April 2017. But suddenly, at one point, I became a criminal, and even an especially dangerous one," Stepanov said in his final speech to the court on 1 September 2022. "So dangerous that I was arrested and placed in solitary confinement in a special block of the pre-trial detention centre, where especially dangerous criminals are kept. This, despite the fact that in my case there are not only no victims, but even no injury."

Stepanov argued that the only prosecution evidence was the fact that he prayed, discussed the Bible, and sang hymns with fellow believers: "Is this a crime? No. All the actions of which I am accused, in accordance with the clarifications of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of 28 October 2021, consisted solely of the 'realisation of my right to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion', and thus, as the Supreme Court explained, 'do not constitute a crime'."

Both Stepanov and Baranov noted Jehovah's Witnesses' pacifist beliefs. "The manifestation of enmity, violence and hatred is

incompatible with my views," Baranov said in his final speech on 1 September. "I don't understand why I'm accused of a crime. Obviously, the only reason is faith."

"For this reason [pacifism], extremism is alien to me. For this reason, there are no victims or injured parties in our case," Stepanov pointed out. "There is not a single fact, not a single document, not a single telephone conversation and not a single frame from video materials in which I or my co-religionists would discuss topics related to extremism. The injured parties are, in fact, we ourselves."

Stepanov and Baranov were taken into custody from the courtroom. They lodged appeals on 14 and 15 September, according to the city court website. Vologda Regional Court has as yet listed no hearings.

"Whatever you do as a Jehovah's Witness, you still commit a crime"

Jehovah's Witnesses and their lawyers draw a distinction between legal, financial, and administrative activities which were the responsibility of now-banned legal entities, and the religious activities of the believers who previously belonged to them, including prayer, Bible study, and hymn singing.

"The entire logic of the charge, Your Honour, is based on a fictitious thesis that belief in Jehovah God is 'a continuation of the activities of an extremist organisation'," Vladimir Yermolayev told the judge in his final speech on 20 May. "And instead of looking for evidence of extremism and my guilt in it, the prosecutor's office was busy proving that I profess the Jehovah's Witness religion, although the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation did not prohibit this."

"Thus, I was driven into a zugzwang position: whatever you do as a Jehovah's Witness, you still commit a crime. One way out is to give up the faith. But this is not an option, it is impossible! So, I will believe and for this I will be judged."

Yermolayev, Aleksandr Putintsev, Igor Mamalimov, and Sergey Kirilyuk were among several Jehovah's Witnesses arrested in the course of more than 50 raids in ten towns and villages across Zabaykalsky Region in February 2020. Investigators originally indicted eight men, but dropped the charges against four of them.

All four defendants made an unsuccessful appeal at Zabaykalsky Regional Court on 20 September. Putintsev and Mamalimov were apparently under no restrictions during the investigation and trial, so will have no time deducted from their prison terms (Yermolayev spent 3 days in detention and 50 days under house arrest, Kirilyuk 5 days in detention).

Tatarstan: One Nursi trial underway

Three men are appearing in court in Naberezhnyye Chelny in Tatarstan on charges of "continuing the activities" of "Nurdzhular".

Prosecutors lodged their case against Khunar Agayev (born 1982), Aydar Sageyev (born 1993), and Amrakh Akhmedov (born 1999) at Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court on 14 June. Four hearings have so far been postponed because of the absence of witnesses, according to the court website. The next hearing is due on 27 September.

"Two suspects, adherents of the international religious association 'Nurdzhular', recognised as extremist, the activities of which are prohibited by the decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, in 2020-2021 organised a cell of this association in the city of Naberezhnyye Chelny, attracted new members to it, and stored relevant literature," the Tatarstan Investigative Committee said in a statement on its website on 25 November 2021. "The third suspect was actively involved in the activities of the cell."

Investigators later charged two of the men ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2747](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2747)) under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1, and one under Part 2 (it remains unclear which). The Tatarstan Investigative Committee said in a further statement on 8 June 2022 that two of the defendants were in detention, while the third – who had allegedly "admitted his involvement" – had been placed under house arrest.

Agayev, Sageyev and Akhmedov have not yet been added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)).

The Tatarstan Investigative Committee told Forum 18 on 1 June to direct all enquiries about the case to the Federal-level Investigative Committee in Moscow. Forum 18 wrote to the Federal Investigative Committee before the start of the working day of 22 August, seeking clarification of the charges and restrictive measures applied to the three men, and asking why they are considered dangerous and who has been harmed by their actions. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day of 26 September.

Tatarstan: Another Nursi trial to follow

Another three Muslims in Tatarstan who met to study Nursi's writings are likely to go on trial on similar charges in the winter, one of their lawyers told Forum 18. The FSB security service in Tatarstan's capital, Kazan, opened a case against them ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2747](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2747)) under Criminal Code Article 282.2 in autumn 2021.

Aliakber Idyaddin Ogly Pashayev (born 5 September 1966) and Rinat Asgatovich Yusupov (born 30 May 1976) remain in detention while expert analysis is being carried out, a fellow Muslim following the case from outside Russia told Forum 18 on 16 August. Vladimir Yevgenyevich Katnov (born 1 June 1985), who has pleaded guilty, was released under travel restrictions in late March.

Forum 18 wrote to the Federal Investigative Committee in Moscow before the start of the working day of 22 August to ask when and in which court the case will be heard, why Katnov, Pashayev and Yusupov are considered dangerous, and who has been harmed by their actions. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day of 26 September.

Investigators had all three added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 29 November 2021.

#### Dagestan: Criminal cases closed

The Dagestan Investigative Committee opened criminal cases in 2021 and 2022 against at least eighteen people ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2747](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2747)) whom they accused of participation in "Nurdzhular" cells, primarily in the town of Izberbash, but with at least one case in the capital Makhachkala. Courts have now closed all of these cases, according to a Muslim who has been following proceedings from outside Russia.

According to the Izberbash City Court website, judges halted court proceedings "in connection with the active repentance" of the defendants, who had all been charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2. A note appended to Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code states: "A person who has committed a crime under this article for the first time and has voluntarily stopped participating in the activities of a public or religious association or other organisation [banned as extremist], shall be exempted from criminal liability if their actions do not constitute a different offence."

"In 2016-2017, the defendants joined and took part in the activities of the international religious association 'Nurdzhular', the activities of which the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation decided to ban on 10 April 2008 in connection with the implementation of extremist activities," Dagestan's Investigative Committee said on its website on 17 May, in reference to one of the cases judges later closed. "In order to continue the illegal activities of this religious association, the suspects took part in meetings to study the ideological sources of the organisation."

"People have been persuaded or forced to sign confessions by intimidation and deception," another fellow Muslim who had been following the cases told Forum 18 on 31 May 2022. "This has happened in large numbers."

Izberbash City Court sentenced Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev (born 16 February 1977) in May 2018 to eight years' imprisonment plus two years of restrictions on freedom ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2386](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2386)) for alleged involvement in "Nurdzhular".

#### Tatarstan: Cassational appeal unsuccessful

On 4 August, Nakiya Khametzakirovna Sharifullina (born 1 January 1958) made an unsuccessful cassational appeal at the 6th Cassational Court in Samara against her conviction under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of 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").

Sharifullina is now halfway through the 18-month probationary period of a two-year suspended sentence. Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court found her guilty on 31 August 2021 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2684](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2684)) of organising a "madrassah" at which attendees studied Nursi's "Risale-i Nur" (Messages of Light) collection, as well as the Koran and the Turkish language. Tatarstan's Supreme Court upheld her conviction and sentence on 17 December 2021 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2713](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2713)), while also rejecting a prosecution appeal which claimed her punishment was too lenient.

Investigators had Sharifullina added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2687](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687)) on 11 June 2020. (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 survey of the general state of freedom of religion and belief in Russia ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2246](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](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215))

A personal commentary by the Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis (<https://www.sova-center.ru>), Alexander Verkhovsky, about the systemic problems of Russian "anti-extremism" laws ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1468](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](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351))

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