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## **RUSSIA: Jailed for meetings "to understand the Koran [and] strengthen his faith"**

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

*Khunar Agayev testified to Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court that he had read Muslim theologian Said Nursi's books "to understand the Koran [and] strengthen his faith". When others were interested, he explained Nursi's works to them. The court in March jailed him and another Muslim who met others to study Nursi's works for 2 and a half years for "organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation" and ordered their religious books destroyed. The court gave a third Muslim a suspended sentence. Elsewhere, a Kazan court handed suspended sentences to three Muslims who also met to study Nursi's works.*

In two trials which ended a month apart, six Muslims in Tatarstan have been found guilty of "extremism" offences for meeting to study the works of theologian Said Nursi. Judges handed two of the men prison terms of two and a half years, while the rest received suspended sentences. These are the first convictions for alleged involvement in "Nurdzhular" – an association Muslims in Russia deny has ever existed in Russia – since the August 2021 conviction of 63-year-old Nakiya Sharifullina, and the first prison terms imposed since the May 2018 eight-year jail sentence given to Ilgar Vagif ogly Aliyev.

On 13 March 2023, after a nine-month trial, Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court sentenced Khunar Agayev and Aydar Sageyev to 2 years and 6 months' imprisonment for "organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation" (Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1). Their fellow defendant Amrakh Akhmedov, charged with "participation" in these activities, received a suspended sentence of 1 year and 6 months with 2 years' probation (see below).

Agayev testified in court that he had read Nursi's books "in order to understand the Koran [and] strengthen his faith". When others were interested, he explained Nursi's works to them and translated for those who did not understand Turkish (see below).

Sageyev told the court that he considers himself an "ordinary Muslim". At the meetings in his flat, he said, they discussed both Nursi's books and others, and did not talk about causing harm to people of other faiths, or positive perceptions of death or suicide – he views such things negatively (see below).

The judge also ordered a number of books by and about Said Nursi, seized from the men during the investigation, to be destroyed as they were all "used as the means of commission of a crime". Courts in other cases have ordered religious literature to be destroyed. In January 2020, Nadezhdinsky District Court in Primorye ordered two Bibles seized from Jehovah's Witnesses to be destroyed. The judge ordered the books by and about Nursi to be destroyed even though they have not been banned (see below).

By the time of the verdict, Agayev and Sageyev had been in pre-trial detention for nearly 16 months since their November 2021 arrest (see below).

Asked in May 2022 why the men were considered dangerous and who had been harmed by their actions, Tatarstan Investigative Committee refused to answer and referred all enquiries to the Federal Investigative Committee in Moscow. Forum 18 put the same questions to the Federal Investigative Committee in August 2022, but has received no reply (see below).

Forum 18 asked the Tatarstan Republic Prosecutor's Office on 17 April 2023 why it had sought jail sentences for Agayev, Sageyev, and Akhmedov and whether it planned to challenge the punishments imposed. Forum 18 also asked why the three were considered dangerous and who had been harmed by their activities. Forum 18 has received no reply (see below).

On 14 April, Privolzhsky District Court in the Tatar capital Kazan handed down three suspended sentences:

- 6 years to Vladimir Katnov under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1, ("Organising a banned extremist organisation);
- 3 years to Rinat Yusupov under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2, ("Participating in a banned extremist organisation);
- and 2 years and 6 months to Aliakber Pashayev under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2, ("Participating in a banned extremist

organisation).

Their probationary periods are not yet known (see below).

Forum 18 asked the Tatarstan Republic Prosecutor's Office on 17 April why it had sought prison sentences for Katnov, Yusupov, and Pashayev and whether it planned to challenge the lesser punishments the District Court had imposed. Forum 18 also asked why the three were considered dangerous and who had been harmed by their activities. Forum 18 has received no reply (see below).

One other criminal trial involving Muslims who read Nursi's works continues – that of six men in Moscow who have all been charged ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2769](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2769)) under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 for allegedly organising a "cell" of "Nurdzhular" in the capital. Their next hearing is due to take place at Moscow's Kuzminsky District Court on 28 April. All six remain in detention.

#### Ban on meeting to study Nursi's works

Muslims who meet to study Nursi's works may be prosecuted under the Extremism Law ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2778](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2778)) for organising or participating in the activities of "Nurdzhular" (derived from the Turkish for "Nursi followers"). The Supreme Court banned this association 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.

In verdicts and court press statements, the banned alleged organisation "Nurdzhular"'s goals are frequently described as being the creation of "cells" with "a positive perception of death" and "a willingness to sacrifice oneself in the interests of the doctrine", thus creating favourable conditions for "the formation of a resource base for other organisations of an extremist or terrorist orientation which use Islamic rhetoric".

Typically, such Muslims meet in homes to study Islam, with one or more expounding on the writings of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi. They also pray, eat, and drink tea together, and do not seek state permission to meet.

Many Russian translations of Nursi's books have been banned as "extremist" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), both before and after the ban on "Nurdzhular", despite their not calling for violence or the violation of human rights. They were added to the Justice Ministry's Federal List of Extremist Materials.

On 28 August 2018, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg found that Russian bans on Nursi's works violated Article 10 ("Freedom of expression") of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Application Nos. 1413/08 and 28621/11 (<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-185293>)).

All ECtHR judgments require states to take steps to prevent similar violations from happening – for example, by changing laws and state practices. This process is supervised by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. In March 2022, Russia withdrew from the Council of Europe and the ECtHR after its renewed invasion of Ukraine. In June 2022, Russia passed legal amendments under which ECtHR judgments are no longer enforced in Russia ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2765](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2765)).

#### Prosecutions, possible punishments

After the 2008 ban on the alleged Russian Muslim organisation "Nurdzhular" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2805](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2805)), Muslims who have met to study Nursi's books have been 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". This normally happens after they have been kept under Federal Security Service (FSB) or ordinary police surveillance for some months.

Jehovah's Witnesses also continue to be prosecuted for alleged "extremist activity" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2805](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2805)) under the same Article, as well as, in some cases, Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing 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 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)) which among many other financial 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, even if no trial ever takes place.

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.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, more than 650 people have gone on trial or remain under investigation on charges of "continuing the activities" of the Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre and its subsidiary organisations, which the Supreme Court liquidated as "extremist" in 2017 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2297](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297)). Of these, 102 have so far received prison sentences, 173 suspended sentences, and 33 fines. For example, eight of nine Jehovah's Witnesses convicted on "extremism"-related charges in two trials in Russia's Far East in December 2022 received jail terms of 6 to 7 years ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2805](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2805)). An Amur Region Prosecutor's Office official justified the jailings: "Any missionary activity of members of a religious organisation liquidated by a court in connection with repeated violations of the law on countering extremist activity will be illegal in nature and subject to liability established by law." The nine were among 124 Jehovah's Witnesses criminally convicted in 2022 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2805](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2805)).

Among recent 2023 sentences, on 17 April, Akhtubinsk City Court in Astrakhan Region sentenced Sergey Korolyov, Rinat Kiramov, and Sergey Kosyanenko to 7 years' imprisonment each under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), Part 1, ("Organising a banned extremist organisation") and Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing extremist activity").

Has October 2021 Supreme Court guidance made any difference?

The Supreme Court's guidelines for "extremism"-related cases were updated in October 2021 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2698](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2698)). They now 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 amendments 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 Criminal Code Article 282.2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), Part 2, ["Participating in a banned extremist organisation"], if they do not contain signs of extremism". This has only had a limited impact, and Jehovah's Witnesses continue to be convicted for meeting for prayer, hymn singing, and Bible study ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2805](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2805)).

It appears that one of these provisions did have an effect on the release in November 2022 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2805](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2805)) of the only still-jailed Muslim who met other Muslims to study Nursi's works – Ilgar Vagif ogly Aliyev, who received an eight-year sentence in May 2018 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2386](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2386)). An appeal judge at the 5th Cassational Court in Pyatigorsk agreed, firstly, that his charge under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 should be dropped, because such actions are already covered under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 (under which Aliyev was also convicted); and secondly, that ogly Aliyev's original sentence had been miscalculated.

In Naberezhnyye Chelny, it appears that the amended guidelines did not have an effect. In Kazan, this remains unclear, as no written verdict is yet available.

Naberezhnyye Chelny: Two prison terms, one suspended sentence

On 13 March, after 13 hearings over nine months ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2775](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2775)), Judge Rustam Khakimov of Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court found three Muslims guilty of "continuing the activities of a banned extremist organisation" for meeting to study the writings of Said Nursi.

Khunar Alyar ogly Agayev (born 17 February 1982) and Aydar Ilkhamovich Sageyev (born 12 April 1993) "organised a cell of ["Nurdzhular"] in the city of Naberezhnyye Chelny in 2020-21, attracted new members to it, and stored relevant literature", according

to a 13 March statement by the Tatarstan Investigative Committee. Amrakh Elnur ogly Akhmedov (born 16 May 1999) "took an active part in the activities of the cell", it added.

Agayev and Sageyev both received prison sentences of two years and six months under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), Part 1, ("Organising a banned extremist organisation"), to be served in a general-regime labour camp. The judge handed Akhmedov, charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), Part 2, ("Participating in a banned extremist organisation"), a suspended sentence of one year and six months with two years' probation (during which he must register regularly with probation authorities and cannot change his place of residence, work, or study without notifying them).

Prosecutors had sought prison sentences of 8 years for Agayev, 7 years for Sageyev, and 5 years for Akhmedov.

The judge decided not to sentence any of the three to an additional period of restrictions on freedom or any bans on particular occupations or activities. Should the verdict enter legal force, however, Agayev and Sageyev will have an active criminal record (sudimost) ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)) for eight years after they are released, during which they will be under administrative supervision. Akhmedov's sudimost will be the same length as his probationary period ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)).

The judge also ordered to be destroyed a number of books by and about Said Nursi, seized from the men in the course of the investigation. Although these books are not themselves on the Justice Ministry's Federal List of Extremist Materials ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), the Russian translations of some of them are, and the judge decided that all of them had been "used as the means of commission of a crime". Other books, papers, and phones are to be returned.

Courts in other cases have ordered religious literature to be destroyed. In January 2020, Nadezhdinsky District Court in Primorye ordered two Bibles seized from Jehovah's Witnesses to be destroyed ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2536](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2536)).

Two of the Naberezhnyye Chelny defendants – it is unclear which – lodged appeals against their convictions on 30 March, according to the city court website. The Supreme Court of the Republic of Tatarstan has not yet listed any appeal hearings on its site.

Agayev and Sageyev will remain in a pre-trial detention centre until the verdict comes into force. They have been in custody since their arrest on 23 November 2021. Akhmedov was also in detention between 23 November and 30 December 2021, then under house arrest until 13 September 2022, when he was placed under travel restrictions and a good behaviour agreement. These measures will also remain in place until the verdict enters legal force. Time spent in detention will be subtracted from Agayev and Sageyev's prison sentences at a rate of one day's detention to a day and a half in prison.

Investigators and prosecutors have not added any of the men to 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 brings many financial consequences including the freezing of bank accounts.

Forum 18 asked the Tatarstan Investigative Committee in May 2022 why the men were considered dangerous, and who had been harmed by their actions. Press spokesperson Andrey Sheptitsky responded on 1 June 2022, declining to answer any questions and referring all enquiries to the Federal Investigative Committee in Moscow. Forum 18 put the same questions to the Federal Investigative Committee ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2775](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2775)) on 22 August 2022, but has received no reply.

Forum 18 asked the Tatarstan Republic Prosecutor's Office in writing on 17 April 2023 why it had sought jail sentences for Agayev, Sageyev, and Akhmedov and whether it planned to challenge the punishments imposed. Forum 18 also asked why the three were considered dangerous and who had been harmed by their activities. Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day in Kazan of 26 April.

Naberezhnyye Chelny: "Serious crimes"

Forum 18 asked Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court in writing on 18 April whether the judge had taken into account the Supreme Court's October 2021 guidance for "extremism" cases ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2698](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2698)), why Agayev, Sageyev, and Akhmedov were considered dangerous, and who had been harmed by their actions. Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day in Naberezhnyye Chelny of 26 April.

A court statement on the day of sentencing said that the men had "committed serious crimes against the basis of the constitutional order and the security of the state", and had been aware that the activities of "Nurdzhular" are banned and that its activities "threaten interethnic and interfaith stability [and] the territorial integrity of the state".

Agayev and Sageyev, the statement went on, stood accused of organising "a safe house ('madrassah') in order to educate citizens of the Russian Federation and foreign citizens about the collected works of "Risale-i Nur" by Said Nursi .. under the guise of classes on

religious topic". In this "madrassah", they stored "extremist" literature and "conducted regular meetings with young people", in which they involved Akhmedov.

The written verdict of 13 March, seen by Forum 18, gives no explicit indication that Judge Khakimov took into account the Supreme Court's October 2021 guidance for "extremism" cases ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2698](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2698)) in considering the charges against the three men.

Agayev and Sageyev both pleaded not guilty. They acknowledged that they had read and discussed Nursi's writings with friends and acquaintances at the flat Sageyev shared with some Turkmen students, but denied exercising any control or influence over anyone who attended, discussing political topics, or calling for "extremist" actions. Sageyev insisted that he had found out about the banned alleged Russian Muslim organisation "Nurdzhular" only after his arrest. Agayev admitted to having heard of it, but denied any connection.

Agayev testified that he had read Nursi's books "in order to understand the Koran [and] strengthen his faith". When others were interested, he explained Nursi's works to them and translated for those who did not understand Turkish.

Sageyev stated that he considers himself an "ordinary Muslim". At the meetings in his flat, he said, they discussed both Nursi's books and others, and did not talk about causing harm to people of other faiths, or positive perceptions of death or suicide – he views such things negatively. "Nurdzhular" was never mentioned.

Akhmedov admitted to attending the meetings at Sageyev's home, and to buying Russian versions of Nursi's books in Turkey after Agayev had shown him one of them in Turkish. According to the verdict, he told the court that he had read an (unspecified) article about "Nurdzhular" online, but that Agayev had explained that it was an organisation outside Russia led by Fethullah Gulen, that they themselves were doing nothing illegal, and that they were reading Nursi's books in their original Turkish because these versions were not banned in Russia.

Akhmedov stated that, when he bought his own copies, he did not know that they were banned in Russia, and that when he learned this, he "put them in the back of a cupboard and forgot about them". When he found out on the internet that people had been convicted for being associated with the banned alleged Russian Muslim organisation "Nurdzhular", and that prosecutors were trying to have Nursi's books in Turkish banned, he started to distance himself from the meetings.

Akhmedov testified that neither Agayev nor Sageyev had presented themselves as members of Nurdzhular. He also corroborated their statements that, during meetings, there were no calls to commit any illegal actions, no conspiracy, no discussion of suicide, and no "positive perception of death" – they drank tea, prayed, and read religious literature, including the Koran, hadiths, and tafsir (exegesis). He noted that there was no difference between what was said in the mosque and at the meetings in the flat.

Judge Khakimov decided that the defendants were "well-acquainted with the works of Said Nursi" and the fact that some of them are banned in Russia, that Agayev occupied a "dominant position", and that attendees of the meetings understood that the books they were studying "were related to Nurdzhular".

"The court considers that the activity of Agayev, Sageyev, and Akhmedov went beyond simple profession of faith and involved the organisation and carrying out, in a flat specially equipped with the relevant literature, meetings with the aim of continuing and renewing the activities of a banned organisation, by means of studying with others the original sources of the writings of Said Nursi which have been prohibited in Russia, which constitute the ideological basis of the Nurdzhular association", the judge concluded.

"The defence argument that the defendants are innocent because they did not commit any extremist actions, but only continued to profess their religion, which is not prohibited, is without validity, since it represents a deliberate conflation of concepts: a person's individual faith and the organisation of and participation in the activities of ["Nurdzhular"], which is banned by law."

The defence also pointed to the European Court of Human Rights ruling of 28 August 2018 (Application Nos. 1413/08 and 28621/11 (<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-185293>)), which found that Russian bans on Nursi's works violated Article 10 ("Freedom of expression") of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Judge Khakimov, however, refused to take this into account, "since at present, rulings of the ECtHR are not obliged to be enforced on the territory of the Russian Federation".

In June 2022, Russia passed legal amendments under which ECtHR judgments are no longer enforced in Russia ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2765](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2765)).

Naberezhnyye Chelny: "Mitigating factors"

The minimum prison term under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), Part 1, ("Organising a banned extremist organisation") is 6 years, followed by up to 2 years of restrictions on freedom and prohibition of particular occupations or activities for up to 10 years ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)). Under Part 2

("Participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation"), the minimum jail term is 2 years, followed by up to a year's restrictions on freedom and a discretionary ban on particular occupations or activities for up to 5 years.

According to the verdict, Judge Khakimov deemed it necessary to send Agayev and Sageyev to prison (rather than suspend their sentences or give them fines), "considering the circumstances of the case and the severity of what was done". He decided, however, to impose lighter punishments than the minimum provided for in the Criminal Code, with no additional restrictive measures or bans for them or Akhmedov, given mitigating factors.

The judge noted that none of the three defendants had any previous criminal or administrative convictions, all had relatives with chronic illnesses, as well as health problems of their own, and all had good character references (including, in Akhmedov's case, from the director of the Rodnik House of Friendship of the Peoples, a cultural centre promoting good inter-ethnic relations in Naberezhnyye Chelny). Akhmedov also partially "recognised his guilt and repented".

Judge Khakimov also in August 2021 convicted Nakiya Sharifullina, the last Muslim to be found guilty for meeting with others to study Nursi's works ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2684](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2684)) under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), Part 1, ("Organising a banned extremist organisation"). Sharifullina was 63 at the time, and she too received a sentence of less than the minimum – a two-year suspended sentence with 18 months' probation and no additional restrictions.

Judge Khakimov also convicted and handed suspended sentences in December 2021 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2713](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2713)) to four Jehovah's Witnesses, Ilkham Karimov, Konstantin Matrashov, Vladimir Myakushin and Aydar Yulmetyev.

Kazan: Three suspended sentences

On 14 April, three more Muslims who met to study Nursi's writings received suspended sentences after a five-month trial in Kazan ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2775](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2775)), Tatarstan's capital.

Judge Ilnur Garifullin of the city's Privolzhsky District Court found Vladimir Yevgenyevich Katnov (born 1 June 1985) guilty under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), Part 1, ("Organising a banned extremist organisation"). The Judge also found Aliakber Idayaddin ogly Pashayev (born 5 September 1966) and Rinat Asgatovich Yusupov (born 30 May 1976) guilty under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2215](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)), Part 2, ("Participating in a banned extremist organisation"), according to the court website.

No written verdict is available, but local news website Kazanfirst.ru reported on 15 April that all three had pleaded guilty.

Prosecutors requested prison terms for all three men, Kazanfirst.ru noted on 7 April – 6 years for Katnov, plus deprivation of the right to teach; 5 years and 6 months for Yusupov, and 4 years for Pashayev.

The judge handed Katnov a 6-year suspended sentence with 1 year of restrictions on freedom and a 3-year ban on holding positions in religious organisations. Yusupov and Pashayev received suspended sentences of 3 years and 2 years and 6 months respectively, both also with bans on holding positions in religious organisations (Kazanfirst.ru did not specify how long these bans would last or whether Yusupov and Pashayev would also be under restrictions on freedom).

The three men's probationary periods – during which time conviction for any other offence would send them to prison – remain unknown. Sudimost (the state of having an active criminal record) for people with suspended sentences expires at the same time as probation, unless the judge has imposed a period of restrictions on freedom ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)) which ends later, in which case sudimost will expire one year after that date.

Investigators had all three men added on 29 November 2021 to 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 brings many financial consequences including the freezing of bank accounts. The men will remain on the List for the duration of their sudimost periods, should their sentences come into force.

It is unknown whether any of the defendants will appeal to Tatarstan's Supreme Court. They have 15 days to do so, as the appeal period was extended from 10 days in December 2022. Yusupov and Pashayev remain in detention until the verdict enters legal force, while Katnov has been under travel restrictions since March 2022.

Forum 18 wrote to Privolzhsky District Court on 18 April to seek clarification of their probationary periods and ask if the judge had taken into account the Supreme Court's October 2021 guidance for "extremism" cases ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2698](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2698)). Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day in Kazan of 26 April.

Vladimir Katnov is a chemistry lecturer at Kazan National Research Technological University. "Colleagues cannot report anything

bad about the detainee", the university's press service commented to the Business Online news website on 12 November 2021, shortly after his initial arrest ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2747](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2747)). "Katnov did not conduct illegal activities on the territory of the university."

Forum 18 wrote to the Tatarstan Republic Prosecutor's Office on 17 April to ask why it had sought prison sentences for Katnov, Yusupov, and Pashayev and whether it planned to challenge the lesser punishments Judge Garifullin had imposed. Forum 18 also asked why the three were considered dangerous and who had been harmed by their activities. Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day in Kazan of 26 April.

Prosecutors accused Katnov, Yusupov, and Pashayev of "disseminating a banned ideology among young people from Muslim families", according to [Kazanfirst.ru](https://kazanfirst.ru). All three insisted that they had meant no harm.

"There is no clear idea of what 'Nurdzhular' is, even among experts. And how am I, as a simple believer, to decide who is who? I did not know that I could be prosecuted for extremism for reading books and [offering] hospitality," Katnov said in his final statement to the court on 7 April. "Now I have realised and understood it. Many of the witnesses do not speak Russian well, and for them these meetings were more educational in nature and gave them more practice communicating in Russian. Despite this, from the first interrogation I realised my guilt and confessed. I repent and will not do such things in the future."

"I confirm that I read these books [and] attended meetings, but there was no malicious intent", Yusupov told the court in his own final statement on the same day. Despite his guilty plea, he too questioned the existence of "Nurdzhular": "I taught management. I know that an organisation has its own structure: there is a boss, there are salaries, everyone has their own responsibilities, and so on. None of that was present here." (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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