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RUSSIA: 28 new raids, now 20 criminal investigations

By Victoria Arnold, Forum 18

Officers launched 28 raids on Jehovah's Witness homes in May, often forcing entry, threatening occupants with weapons and seizing literature and other items. Under criminal investigation are 6 Jehovah's Witnesses in pre-trial detention, 2 under house arrest and at least 11 under travel restrictions. Two others are already on trial.

Law enforcement officers, some armed and in body armour, raided a further 28 Jehovah's Witness homes in May in Orenburg Region, the Jewish Autonomous Region, and the Urals city of Perm. The latest raids led to detentions, house arrest, travel restrictions, and criminal charges for at least another 11 people.

Six Jehovah's Witnesses are now known to be in pre-trial detention facing criminal investigations or charges. Another two are under house arrest, while at least a further 11 are under travel restrictions. In two other cases, trials are already underway (see full list at base of this article).

As in previous raids, law enforcement agents often forced entry to properties, threatened the occupants with weapons, and confiscated personal items, including bank cards. They then took Jehovah's Witnesses, including minors, away for interrogation, sometimes for several hours overnight (see below).

Law enforcement agencies carried out the searches and arrests in Perm, Birobidzhan and four towns in Orenburg Region in mid-May, in some cases accompanied by National Guard troops or riot police armed with machine guns. They came about a month after similar searches in Ufa (Bashkortostan Republic), Polyarny (Murmansk Region), Shuya (Ivanovo Region), and Vladivostok. Criminal investigations are continuing in these places, as well as in Belgorod and Kemerovo, where Jehovah's Witnesses also suffered armed raids in January and February (see F18News 23 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372>).

Officials know that using troops and weapons including machine guns on raids is unnecessary, as Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide are a doctrinally pacifist community whose young male members worldwide will not do compulsory military service or any other military-connected activity. However, even before Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in Russia their communities were frequently raided by heavily armed and camouflaged officials who frequently planted "evidence" (see eg. F18News 24 October 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2228>).

The Jehovah's Witnesses caught up in 2018's wave of prosecutions are accused of "continuing the activities" of the Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre, their principal administrative body in Russia, which was outlawed as an "extremist" organisation and liquidated in 2017 (see F18News 18 July 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297>).

Muslims also face "extremism" investigation, trials, jailing

Prosecutors have also long jailed Muslims who meet to read the works of late Turkish theologian Said Nursi. Four were jailed in 2017 (see F18News 8 December 2017 <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2339>). People who meet to study his writings can be accused of continuing the activities of "Nurdzhular", which was banned as an "extremist organisation" by the Supreme Court in 2008, even though Muslims in Russia deny it has ever existed (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215>).

Five Muslims are known by Forum 18 to be already on trial for having met to study Nursi's works - three in Krasnoyarsk, one in Novosibirsk, and one in Izberbash in the Republic of Dagestan. Another man, from Sharypovo in Krasnoyarsk Region, is due to appear in court soon (see F18News 27 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2373>).

Up to 10 years' imprisonment?

If convicted, the Jehovah's Witnesses charged or under investigation could be imprisoned for up to 10 years 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"), or up to six years under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in 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").

One criminal investigation, in Orenburg, is also taking place under Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing of extremist activity"). This appears to be the first use of this Article against people exercising the internationally-recognised right to freedom of religion and belief.

Conviction under Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Provision or collection of funds or rendering of financial services that are knowingly designed to finance the organisation, preparation and commission of at least one extremist crime or the support of the activities of an extremist community or an extremist organisation") carries the following penalties:

- a fine of 300,000 to 700,000 Roubles, which is currently between two to four years' annual salary;

- or compulsory labour for a period of one to four years, with possible deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities for a period of up to three years, or with possible restrictions on freedom for a period of up to one year;

- or three to eight years' imprisonment.

Forum 18 wrote to the Moscow press office of the Investigative Committee (which is leading most of the investigations) on 23 April, asking why the Jehovah's Witnesses detained in Ufa, Shuya, and Polyarny were considered so dangerous that armed force had to be used. On 10 May, Lieutenant Colonel S. Solovyov replied only that all available information on these cases could be found on the Bashkortostan, Ivanovo Region, and Murmansk Region Investigative Committee websites.

None of the people involved in the latest prosecution yet appears on the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze. Their names may be added while their cases are still ongoing, however, meaning that they will suffer financial restrictions without any trial or conviction (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215>).

Officials added the name of Danish Jehovah's Witness Dennis Ole Christensen to the List shortly after his trial began.

Christensen and Jehovah's Witness elder Arkadya Akopovich Akopyan are currently on trial for alleged "extremism" offences not directly related to the nationwide ban (see F18News 27 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2373>).

Perm

Aleksandr Solovyov and his wife Anna had just returned from a trip abroad when law enforcement agents detained them at Perm-2 railway station on the evening of 22 May. Friends who had come to meet them said that officers put Solovyov in handcuffs and took him and his wife away in separate cars, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses reported on 24 May.

Investigators searched the Solovyovs' home overnight on 22/23 May and seized the deeds to the flat, electronic devices, computer drives, their wifi router, photographs, and their collection of Bibles.

Anna Solovyova was soon released, but Aleksandr was held in a temporary detention centre for two days. Investigators requested that he be kept in pre-trial detention but on 24 May, Judge Aleksei Ryabov of Perm's Sverdlovsk District Court ruled that he should be put under house arrest. While under house arrest, Solovyov is not permitted to leave his flat, use the phone or the internet, send or receive post or speak to any suspects or witnesses in the criminal case.

Solovyov is being investigated under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in 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").

Before the nationwide ban on Jehovah's Witness activity and the consequent liquidation of local communities, Aleksandr Solovyov chaired the Perm Jehovah's Witness congregation, according to federal tax records. Anna Solovyova does not appear on the list of founding members.

Birobidzhan: "Judgment Day"

About 150 law enforcement officers conducted at least nine searches of Jehovah's Witness homes in Birobidzhan, capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region, early in the morning of 17 May, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses announced later that day. The operation was codenamed "Judgment Day", according to the Association.

Officers seized personal photographs, bank cards, money, and electronic devices. So far, one person - Alam Aliyev - is known to be the subject of a criminal case 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").

On 18 May, Judge Marina Tsimarno of Birobidzhan District Court upheld FSB investigators' request to keep Aliyev in pre-trial custody in Birobidzhan's Investigation Prison No. 1 until 13 July, according to court records. Aliyev's lawyers submitted an appeal against his detention on 21 May. On 25 May, Judge Anzhela Sizova of the Court of the Jewish Autonomous Region upheld this appeal, citing "significant violations of criminal procedural law governing the choice of pre-trial detention as a restrictive measure". This freed Aliyev from detention after eight days. It remains unknown what restrictions he remains under.

The FSB's request to hold Aliyev in custody "was motivated by the fact that the crime is classified as grave, for which the law provides for a sentence of imprisonment for a term of six to 10 years", according to a 21 May press statement on the court website. "During the preliminary investigation, it was established that a large number of persons took part in the activity of this organisation. The suspect is the organiser of this extremist organisation and has an actual influence on members of the association."

Birobidzhan was home to the only registered local Jehovah's Witness congregation in the Jewish Autonomous Region, which was among those ruled "extremist" and liquidated before the Supreme Court's decision to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses nationwide. The Court of the Jewish Autonomous Region upheld the local Justice Ministry branch's suit on 3 October 2016, and the community ceased its activities on 20 December 2016, according to federal tax records. Aliyev does not appear in the records as a founder member of the community.

Orenburg Region: Mass raids

Investigative Committee operatives, FSB security service agents, and armed riot police carried out 18 house searches in Orenburg, Buzuluk, Perevolotsky, and Sol-Iletsk, also on 17 May.

They took 15 people away for questioning, three of whom were then sent to a temporary detention centre, according to statements by the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses on 17 May and 21 May.

Of these three, Judge Igor Ismaylov of Industrial District Court ruled on 19 May that one - Vladislav Kolbanov - should be placed under house arrest, while the other two - Aleksandr Suvorov and Vladimir Kochnyov - should be kept in pre-trial detention until 14 July.

Orenburg Region Investigative Committee reported that a further six people are under travel restrictions.

Suvorov and Kochnyov's prison address is:

Orenburg Region

460028 Orenburg

ulitsa Kaliningradskaya 192

Investigation Prison No. 3

The Investigative Committee said in a press statement on 22 May that nine people in Orenburg Region have been formally charged 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"), Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in" such an organisation), and Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing of extremist activity").

The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses thinks that Kochnyov and Suvorov (both from Orenburg) have been charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. Kolbanov (also from Orenburg), Boris Andreyev (from Perevolotsky), and Anatoly Vichkitov (from Sol-Iletsk) are also among those charged, although it remains unclear with which alleged offences.

Before the liquidation of the Administrative Centre, Orenburg and Buzuluk had registered Jehovah's Witness communities, while Perevolotsky and Sol-Iletsk did not. According to federal tax records, Suvorov previously chaired the Central Orenburg Jehovah's Witness community, and Kochnyov was among its founding members.

The raids on 17 May took place "as a result of carefully planned and organised operational and investigative actions", according to the Investigative Committee statement, and had the aim of "seizing documents and items relevant to the criminal case, as well as identifying other persons involved in unlawful activities".

In raiding the historically pacifist Jehovah's Witnesses, police "anti-extremism" officers, the Economic Security and Anti-Corruption Administration, and the Orenburg Region FSB security service were also involved. The raids on pacifists also included what was described as "armed support" from National Guard special forces troops.

Investigators allege that the suspects, knowing of the 2017 ban on Jehovah's Witness activity, "organised the activity of a structural subdivision of Jehovah's Witnesses by calling and holding meetings, organising the recruitment of new members, and communicating the contents of religious literature to meeting participants".

The investigation is continuing, with "necessary investigative and operational-search measures underway in order to collect and consolidate a base of evidence", according to the statement.

Telephones at Orenburg Region Investigative Committee went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 24 May to ask why officials thought armed force was necessary against pacifists.

Polyarny, Murmansk Region

Further details have now emerged of earlier raids on Jehovah's Witness homes in other regions (see F18News 23 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372>).

Two men from Polyarny in Murmansk Region are in pre-trial detention, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses confirmed on 11 May. They are Roman Markin and Viktor Trofimov, who are in custody in the city of Murmansk until 12 June. The Investigative Committee's branch in the closed district of Aleksandrovsk (which includes Polyarny) opened the case against them on 12 April. This is 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").

Markin and Trofimov's prison address is:

Murmansk Region

183027 Murmansk

ulitsa Radishcheva, 32

Investigation Prison No. 1

Before the nationwide ban and liquidation of local Jehovah's Witness organisations, Viktor Trofimov chaired the Polyarny community, according to federal tax records.

The men (who are like all Jehovah's Witnesses pacifists) were detained during armed raids on seven houses in Polyarny on 18 April, which involved armed troops and riot police "who acted extremely rudely", according to Jehovah's Witnesses. Officers searched 17 people in all and confiscated their electronic devices. Interrogations at the Investigative Department of the Northern Fleet's Polyarny Flotilla continued through the night until 7 am the next day (see F18News 23 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372>).

At Roman Markin's home, officers broke down his front door in the early evening, forced him and his 16-year-old daughter to lie on the floor during the search, and threatened them with weapons. Investigators questioned the 16-year-old until 3 am.

During another search, an elderly man opened the door to the riot police, who then "pushed him so violently that he fell", the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses claims. They also hurt two women who were visiting the flat, and forced two teenage siblings to stand against the wall with their arms outstretched.

Vladivostok

Valentin Osadchuk remains in pre-trial detention in Vladivostok, where he is to be held until 20 June. He was formally charged on 27 April under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in 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"), according to the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 23 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372>).

Forum 18 understands Osadchuk's prison address to be:

Primorye Region

690106 Vladivostok

Partizansky prospekt, 28b

Investigation Prison No. 1

Two women, aged 66 and 83, have also been named as suspects under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in 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") and placed under travel restrictions, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses also reported on 10 May. The FSB security service initiated the case against them and Osadchuk on 9 April. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, the investigation involved video surveillance, followed by raids on people's homes on 19 April.

Shuya, Ivanovo Region

Dmitry Mikhailov remains under travel restrictions after the law enforcement raid in his home on 20 April. According to a 15 May statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, the Ivanovo Region Investigative Committee initiated the case against him under Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in 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") on 19 April after several months of investigation which included phone tapping and video surveillance.

Law enforcement agents carried out four raids in the town of Shuya early in the morning of 20 April. During one search of a communal flat, a riot police officer held a pistol to the head of a neighbour, although he had not tried to obstruct the raid, and forced him to lie on the floor for 15 minutes. During another, "a man was threatened with handcuffs to prevent him seeking legal advice by phone", according to the European Association. Officers confiscated the Jehovah's Witnesses' phones, tablet computers, bank cards, and personal documents.

The investigator in charge, Robert Barsegyan, has refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 (see F18News 23 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372>).

Ufa

Anatoly Vilitkevich is still in pre-trial detention and under investigation 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") (see F18News 23 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372>).

Vilitkevich was the first Jehovah's Witness to be detained in the latest round of law enforcement actions, after law enforcement agents, including heavily armed officers, carried out a series of raids in the Bashkortostan capital early on 10 April. Over 20 people were taken in for interrogation, but all except Vilitkevich were later released.

Vilitkevich's prison address is:

Bashkortostan Republic

450015 Ufa

ulitsa Dostoyevskogo, 39

Investigation Prison No. 1

Belgorod

Two Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgorod - Anatoly Shalyapin and Sergey Voykov - remain under investigation for alleged offences under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in 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"). They are still under travel restrictions (see F18News 23 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372>).

The men were among a large number of Jehovah's Witnesses whose homes were searched by Investigative Committee agents and other law enforcement officers in heavy-handed armed raids on 7 February (see F18News 20 February 2018

<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2355>).

Kemerovo

Similar raids took place in Kemerovo in Siberia (see F18News 23 April 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372>). However, it appears that nobody has yet been charged or named as a suspect in that investigation.

The Jehovah's Witnesses currently known to be in pre-trial detention, under house arrest, and under travel restrictions are:

Detention

- Orenburg

1) Vladimir Yuryevich Kochnyov, aged 38, until 14 July 2018

2) Aleksandr Gennadyevich Suvorov, aged 38, until 14 July 2018

- Ufa, Bashkortostan Republic

3) Anatoly Sergeyeovich Vilitkevich, born 15 September 1986 - until 2 June 2018

- Polyarny, Murmansk Region

4) Roman Nikolayevich Markin, born 1974 - until 12 June 2018

5) Viktor Fyodorovich Trofimov, born 1957 - until 12 June 2018

- Vladivostok, Primorye Region

6) Valentin Pavlovich Osadchuk, born 15 March 1976 - until 20 June 2018

- Oryol

7) Dennis Ole Christensen, born 18 December 1972 - until 1 August 2018 (currently on trial)

House arrest

- Orenburg

Vladislav Kolbanov, aged 25

- Perm

Aleksandr Vasilyevich Solovyov, aged 48

Travel restrictions

- Orenburg Region

At least six people - probably including Boris Andreyev and Anatoly Vichkitov

- Oryol

Sergei Vladimirovich Skrynnikov, born 30 October 1962

- Shuya, Ivanovo Region

Dmitry Vasilyevich Mikhailov, born 1977

- Vladivostok, Primorye Region

Two women, names unknown, aged 66 and 83

- Belgorod

Anatoly Shalyapin

Sergei Voykov

Unknown restrictions

- Birobidzhan, Jewish Autonomous Region

Alam A.o. Aliyev, aged 55 - until 13 July 2018

(END)

For more background see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of freedom of religion and belief in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2246, and of the dramatic decline in this freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2215.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

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