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RUSSIA: Three more Jehovah's Witness "extremism" convictions

By Victoria Arnold, Forum 18

As criminal trials of people exercising freedom of religion continue, three more Jehovah's Witnesses have been convicted of "extremist activity". Grigory Bubnov was given a six-year suspended jail sentence while Roman Markin and Viktor Trofimov were each fined about a year's average local wages. The Judge ordered two of Bubnov's Bibles to be destroyed. The court has not explained why.

Courts in Arctic Russia and the Far East have found three Jehovah's Witnesses guilty of "extremist activity" for meeting to pray and read the Bible. Two were fined about one year's average local wages while the third was given a suspended six-year jail term. This brings to 19 the total number of people convicted under the Extremism Law since the Supreme Court's ban on Jehovah's Witness activity.

After earlier trials, 11 Muslim and Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are in jail for exercising freedom of religion or belief in connection with a banned allegedly "extremist" organisation (see list below).

On 21 January, Nadezhdinsky District Court in Primorye convicted 54-year-old Grigory Bubnov. The Judge handed him a suspended six-year prison sentence, plus various restrictions on his freedom during his five-year probation period (see below).

The Judge also ordered two Bibles to be destroyed. The Court has not answered Forum 18's questions about why this was ordered. Officials have also not answered Forum 18's other questions about the cases (see below).

On 24 January, Polyarny District Court in Murmansk Region convicted 45-year-old Roman Markin and 62-year-old Viktor Trofimov and fined each of them about a year's average local wages. The fines were originally about double that, but were reduced because of time spent in pre-trial detention (see below).

Bubnov, Markin and Trofimov all intend to appeal against their convictions (see below).

The trial of Venera Dulova and Aleksandr Pryanikov, and Dulova's daughter Darya Dulova at Karpinsk City Court (Sverdlovsk Region), which has run from 14 August 2019 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2517), is expected to end on 27 January. Prosecutors have requested three-year suspended prison sentences for Venera Dulova and Pryanikov, and a two-year suspended prison sentence for Darya Dulova (see below).

The most recent prison term – of six years - was handed down to 55-year-old Vladimir Alushkin in Penza in December 2019. His wife Tatyana was among five others convicted (see below).

A further 270 or so Jehovah's Witnesses currently face possible prosecution under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of"), or 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"), or Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation") (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215), as well as Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing of extremist activity") (see below).

There are currently 11 Muslim and Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience in jail for exercising their freedom of religion and belief in connection with a banned allegedly "extremist" organisation (see full list at end of this article).

Suspended jail sentence in Far East, Bibles ordered destroyed

On 21 January, Grigory Gennadyevich Bubnov (born 4 September 1965) received a suspended six-year prison sentence at Nadezhdinsky District Court in Primorye, plus various restrictions on his freedom during his five-year period of probation.

Prosecutors had asked for seven years' imprisonment in a general-regime labour camp ("correctional colony") for Bubnov, but Judge

Natalya Derevyagina refused this after a total of 20 hearings over seven months from 31 May 2019 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2482). Bubnov intends to challenge his conviction, Jehovah's Witnesses stated on 21 January 2020.

Primorye Regional Prosecutor's Office has not answered Forum 18's written questions (put to it on 21 January, before Bubnov's sentencing) about why it sought a jail sentence, why meetings for prayer and Bible reading were considered a criminal offence, and who had been harmed by Bubnov's alleged activities. Since the sentence was issued, the Prosecutor's Office has also not answered Forum 18's written question as to whether prosecutors plan to appeal.

Bubnov is the first Jehovah's Witness not to have been jailed after being convicted 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"). If his appeal is unsuccessful, he will be left with a criminal record.

In addition, Judge Derevyagina upheld the prosecutors' request that Bubnov should be barred from participating in public organisations for five years, and from the locations of public events for one year. He was also placed on probation for five years.

She also decided that two Bibles seized during investigators' searches of Jehovah's Witness homes should be destroyed when the ruling comes into force.

Nadezhdinsky District Court has not answered Forum 18's 22 January written question about why the two Bibles were ordered to be destroyed.

If Bubnov's appeal fails and the Judge's verdict enters into force, he will be on probation for the maximum period of five years. If he is convicted of another offence during this time, he may have to serve the full six years in prison, as well as any sentence imposed for the later offence. While on probation, Bubnov will not be able to move house or change his place of work without informing probation authorities.

Investigative Committee, police, and FSB security service officials raided three Jehovah's Witness homes in the village of Razdolnoye on 19 July 2018. They arrested Bubnov with nine other people. Investigators took them away for questioning to the village of Volno-Nadezhdinskoye, where interrogations continued until late at night.

The Jehovah's Witnesses were all then released, but investigators placed Bubnov under travel restrictions and opened a criminal case against him, in which he was accused of "the implementation of organisational actions to convene and hold meetings, [and] the unbroken continuation of the activities of a religious association".

Neither Primorye Region Investigative Committee nor the Primorye Region branch of the FSB have answered Forum 18's 21 January written questions about why meetings for prayer and Bible reading are considered a criminal offence, and who had been harmed by Bubnov's alleged activities.

Unlike many other Jehovah's Witnesses, both in Primorye and elsewhere in Russia, Bubnov was not detained or put under house arrest during the investigation or his trial. On 11 July 2019, his name was added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (although small transactions are permitted) (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215).

According to federal tax records, Bubnov was not a founder member of the Volno-Nadezhinskoye Jehovah's Witness local religious organisation (the only one in the district), and this community was voluntarily dissolved in 2016 before the nationwide ban.

Most other Jehovah's Witness communities were liquidated through the courts (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2256).

Murmansk Region sentences

On 24 January 2020, Judge Viktoriya Loginova imposed fines of 300,000 Roubles and 350,000 Roubles respectively on Roman Nikolayevich Markin (born 18 March 1974) and Viktor Fyodorovich Trofimov (born 26 March 1957), after a total of 21 hearings at Polyarny District Court over the last eight months from 28 May 2019 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2517).

At the men's previous appearance on 15 January 2020, prosecutors had requested jail sentences of 6 years for Markin, and 6 years and 5 months for Trofimov.

"We are happy for Roman, Viktor, and their families that the court did not sentence them to prison," Jehovah's Witnesses commented on 24 January. "However, it remains an injustice for these peaceful men to be convicted and stigmatised as 'extremists'."

300,000 Roubles amounts to almost 11 months' average wages in the men's home town of Polyarny, while 350,000 Roubles is equivalent to more than a year's wages. According to a court press release on 24 January, Judge Loginova in fact handed down fines of 650,000 and 600,000 Roubles to Trofimov and Markin respectively, but that these figures were reduced to take account of the time the two men spent in detention and under house arrest.

Polyarny District Court stated in the press release that Trofimov and Markin, "using the internet, by means of a conference call, organised and conducted collective religious cult activities with participants of an illegal religious organisation located in the town of Polyarny .. including the study, under their direction, of religious literature on the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, [and] prayers to the god Jehovah, and also organised the collection of funds for the activities of a liquidated religious organisation under the guise of donations.

On 15 January, Roman Markin argued in his final speech that the Supreme Court's 2017 ruling applies to the activities of legal entities, including the Polyarny Jehovah's Witness local religious organisation, not to the activities of individual believers.

Markin pointed out that, nevertheless, investigators' attentions had all been directed at the latter rather than the former: "Moreover, an FSB operative later stated, here in the courtroom, during his testimony, that it was not forbidden to get together, study the Bible and preach."

"At the appeal hearing on [pre-trial detention], the judge announced that I was being tried for violation of the constitutional order," Markin continued. "But how is it possible to violate the constitutional system, using only the rights granted by the Constitution, namely, Article 28? How can singing songs based on biblical verses, offering prayers to Almighty God Jehovah, and studying the Bible harm the state and individual citizens?"

Markin also noted that "there have been no destructive consequences of the activities of neither the Polyarny Jehovah's Witness local religious organisation, which existed until April 2017, nor the gathering of Polyarny Jehovah's Witnesses, namely: the destruction of the constitutional order, or harm to individual citizens".

Murmansk Regional Prosecutor's Office has not answered Forum 18's 20 January written questions about why it was seeking a jail sentence, why meetings for prayer and Bible reading were considered a criminal offence, and who had been harmed by Markin and Trofimov's alleged activities.

Murmansk Region Investigative Committee opened the criminal case against Markin and Trofimov 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") (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215) on 12 April 2018.

The case was opened after Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Polyarny had been under surveillance by the FSB security service for several months. It became clear in court that hidden cameras had been placed in their homes.

Neither Murmansk Region Investigative Committee nor the Murmansk Region branch of the FSB have answered Forum 18's 20 January written questions about why they carried out the hidden surveillance, why meetings for prayer and Bible reading were considered a criminal offence, and who had been harmed by Markin and Trofimov's alleged activities.

Markin and Trofimov were arrested along with 11 others during armed raids on seven houses in Polyarny on 18 April 2019. At Markin's home, officers forced him and his 16-year-old daughter to lie on the floor and threatened them with weapons. The two men were then placed in pre-trial detention (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2381).

Murmansk Region Investigation Committee has not answered Forum 18's 23 April 2019 written question about why armed force was used in the raids (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2381).

Markin and Trofimov's alleged "crime" had originally been detected by the Russian Navy's Northern Fleet branch of the FSB security service. The Murmansk Region Investigation Committee claimed: "The suspects, reliably aware of [the ban on Jehovah's Witness activity], during the period from April 2017 to the present, on the territory of Aleksandrovska [a closed military district - ZATO] in Polyarny, organised the activities of the religious organisation by convening and holding meetings, organising the recruitment of new members, and bringing the contents of texts of religious literature to gatherings' participants" (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372).

The two men were released from detention and placed under house arrest on 10 October 2018 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2454). On 7 February 2019, they were released from house arrest but placed under travel restrictions (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2493) for the remainder of the investigation period and their trial (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2517).

Karpinsk trial to end soon?

The trial of Venera Dulova and Aleksandr Pryanikov, and Dulova's daughter Darya Dulova, is expected to end on 27 January 2020 at Karpinsk City Court (Sverdlovsk Region). The trial began on 14 August 2019. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2517)

The three are on trial 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").

On 20 January 2020, prosecutors requested three-year suspended prison sentences for Venera Dulova and Pryanikov, and a two-year prison sentence for Darya Dulova.

Charged for exercising freedom of religion and belief, no torturers charged

Prosecutors normally charge Jehovah's Witnesses under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of"), or 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"), or Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation") (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215), as well as Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("Financing of extremist activity").

As of 17 January, about 270 more Jehovah's Witnesses faced possible prosecution under these charges, Jehovah's Witnesses state. For comparison, in February 2019, 119 Jehovah's Witnesses were known to have been charged or named as suspects in such "extremism"-related cases (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2453).

Muslim readers of works by the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi are also prosecuted under "anti-extremism" legislation and have been imprisoned or fined for involvement in the banned "extremist" organisation "Nurdzhular", which Muslims in Russia deny exists. Typically, such Muslims meet in private homes to study Islam, with one or more expounding on Nursi's works. They also pray, eat, and drink tea together, and do not seek official permission to meet (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215).

Between June 2017 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2290) and June 2018 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2391), six Muslim men were jailed for periods of between two and eight years for meeting together to study Nursi's works. All were convicted under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 or Part 2.

Contrary to Russia's international legal obligations, no official responsible for the torture of seven Jehovah's Witnesses in 2019 has been arrested or put on criminal trial. One of the Jehovah's Witness victims was re-arrested after reporting the torture, and two of the officials implicated have been given awards. Similarly, none has been punished for the 2015 torture of a Muslim who reads Nursi's works (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2489).

Restrictions for about 270 facing trial

Twenty five of about 270 Jehovah's Witnesses who are suspects, have been charged, or are on trial are in pre-trial detention, and 24 are under house arrest. The rest are under travel restrictions, other specific restrictions (such as night-time curfews and bans on phone and internet use), undertakings to present themselves to investigators when summoned, or no known restrictions.

Many of these are also on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (although small transactions are permitted) (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215).

The current investigations, raids, detentions, and jailings of Jehovah's Witnesses are a direct result of the Supreme Court's 2017 ban on their activity throughout Russia, and its decision that the Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre and all 395 local communities are "extremist organisations" (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297).

From January 2018 onwards, the authorities have pursued a policy of frequent raids and searches of Jehovah's Witness homes across Russia (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2412), an intensification of the less frequent raids which took place before the Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in 2017 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2220).

The raids often involve heavily armed riot police or National Guard troops carrying machine guns, despite the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide take a pacifist stance and will not perform compulsory military service or any other military-connected activity. The raids are usually led by the Investigative Committee, but officers of the FSB security service and the police Centre for Combating Extremism have also participated (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2381).

On 10 June 2019, Russian Human Rights Ombudsperson Tatyana Moskalkova commented in her annual report for 2018 that "These events [the conviction and imprisonment of Danish citizen Dennis Christensen – see below] raise questions about the existence of a

conflict between the constitutional right to practice one's religion individually or jointly with others, and the signs of extremist activity specified in Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation" (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2489).

As well as raids, detentions, and criminal prosecutions, Jehovah's Witnesses also face the loss of property and other problems (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2344). Young Jehovah's Witness men have been denied their right to perform alternative civilian service rather than military service, and Jehovah's Witness employees have been fired or forced to resign from their jobs (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297).

The children of Jehovah's Witnesses have also faced threats and bullying by the authorities (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2282).

Criminal prosecutions

Primorye Region has the highest number of Jehovah's Witnesses – 23 – who have been subject to criminal prosecution since the 2017 ban. This figure includes Bubnov and five others who are currently on trial – Dmitry Malevany, Aleksey Trofimov, Olga Panyuta, and Olga Opaleva at Spassk District Court, and Dmitry Barmakin at Pervorechensk District Court in Vladivostok; on 12 November 2019, Vladivostok's Lenin District Court returned the case against another seven Jehovah's Witnesses to prosecutors.

Other regions with particularly high numbers of prosecutions are: Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region – 22; Jewish Autonomous Region – 14; Magadan Region – 13; Khabarovsk Region – 12; Kirov Region – 11; Stavropol Region – 11; and Nizhny Novgorod Region – 11.

Current sentenced prisoners of conscience

There are currently 11 prisoners of conscience being held after being sentenced for their exercise of freedom of religion and belief in connection with a banned allegedly "extremist" organisation:

- On 7 November 2017, Muslim reader of Nursi's works Artur Abdulgamidovich Kaltuyev was sentenced to three years in a labour camp ("correctional colony"). (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2339)

- On 28 May 2018, Muslim reader of Nursi's work's Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev was sentenced to eight years in a labour camp. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2386)

- On 6 February 2019, Jehovah's Witness and Danish citizen Dennis Christensen was sentenced to six years in a labour camp. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2450)

- On 19 September 2019, a court in Saratov jailed six Jehovah's Witnesses: (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2510)

- 1) Konstantin Viktorovich Bazhenov was jailed for three years and six months;
- 2) Aleksey Vladimirovich Budenchuk was jailed for three years and six months;
- 3) Feliks Khasanovich Makhammadiyev was jailed for three years;
- 4) Roman Aleksandrovich Gridasov was jailed for two years;
- 5) Gennady Vasilyevich German was jailed for two years;
- 6) and Aleksey Petrovich Miretsky was jailed for two years.

- On 5 November 2019, a court in Tomsk sentenced one Jehovah's Witness to imprisonment:

- 1) Sergei Gennadyevich Klimov (born 26 March 1970), six years.

- On 13 December 2019, a court in Penza convicted six Jehovah's Witnesses and sentenced one to imprisonment:

- 1) Vladimir Aleksandrovich Alushkin (born 30 June 1964), six years.

Sentence completed but held for deportation

- On 19 June 2017, Muslim reader of Nursi's work's Yevgeny Lvovich Kim was sentenced to three years and nine months in a labour camp (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2290). After his arrest on 26 December 2015, he was tortured in

pre-trial detention (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2290). On his release on 10 April 2019, he was immediately taken to a court where he was stripped of Russian citizenship – because officials had confiscated his documents the day before – leaving Kim stateless (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2290). He has since been in detention awaiting deportation to his country of birth, Uzbekistan, of which he has never been a citizen (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2290).
(END)

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

For more background see Forum 18's survey of the general state of freedom of religion and belief in Russia (http://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 (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
(http://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
(http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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