

Amid continuing police, FSB and Investigative Committee raids across Russia, 69 Jehovah's Witnesses are now facing criminal investigations. Of these, 25 are in detention, 9 under house arrest, and 30 under travel restrictions. Three trials are already underway, including of Dennis Christensen, in detention since May 2017.

A total of 69 Jehovah's Witnesses are now the subjects of criminal investigations in 22 regions of Russia, Forum 18 notes. Of these, 25 are currently in pre-trial detention, 9 are under house arrest, and 30 are under travel restrictions. One person is under a specific set of restrictive measures, and only four are thought to be under no restrictions at all as the cases against them proceed.



Raids and prosecutions appear to have become particularly intense in Russia's Far Eastern Federal District, with investigations ongoing in seven of its nine regions.

Law enforcement officers have been raiding Jehovah's Witness homes across Russia, leading to criminal prosecutions and often long stretches in pre-trial detention or under house arrest. Officers of the Investigative Committee and FSB security service carried out the latest raids in Kamchatka, Khabarovsk, Primorye, Kostroma, Kemerovo, Amur, and Penza Regions in July and August and opened criminal cases against another 16 people, six of whom remain in custody (see below).

The Jehovah's Witnesses have largely been charged (or named as suspects) under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 or Part 2 ("Organisation of" or "Participation in the activities of a banned extremist organisation"). For exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief by meeting for worship, they stand accused of "continuing the activities" of the Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre and its subsidiary local organisations, all of which the Russian Supreme Court ruled extremist and ordered liquidated in April 2017.

Investigators have also charged a few individuals under Criminal Code Article 282.3, Part 1 ("financing of extremist activity"), or Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation").

These prosecutions are happening despite the Supreme Court judges' insistence when they issued the ruling that it "does not amount to prohibition of the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses as such", and despite the fact that the Russian government has twice claimed that the ban "does not contain a restriction or prohibition on individual profession of [Jehovah's Witness] teachings" (see F18News 23 April 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2372).

As a direct result of the Supreme Court's 2017 decision, arrests and interrogations of Jehovah's Witnesses and searches of their homes began in January 2018 and show no sign of stopping. So far, criminal investigations are underway in the following regions: Amur, Republic of Bashkortostan, Belgorod, Ivanovo, Jewish Autonomous Region, Kamchatka, Khabarovsk, Kemerovo, Kostroma, Krasnoyarsk, Magadan, Murmansk, Omsk, Orenburg, Penza, Perm, Primorye, Pskov, Republic of Sakha-Yakutiya, Saratov, Republic of Tatarstan, and Tomsk (see F18News 11 July 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2394).

Will Human Rights Ombudsperson respond to appeals?

Individual Jehovah's Witnesses have appealed to Tatyana Moskalkova, Human Rights Ombudsperson of the Russian Federation, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 13 September. The Association is unaware, however, that any of them has received any assistance.

Forum 18 wrote to the office of Human Rights Ombudsperson Moskalkova on 7 September, asking why law enforcement agencies use armed force in operations against pacifist Jehovah's Witnesses, why so many people are in pre-trial detention, and whether the Ombudsperson's office is doing anything to help them. Forum 18 has received no response as of the end of the Moscow working day on 13 September.

On 21 June, the Presidential Council on Human Rights asked Russia's General Prosecutor's Office to examine the legality of the recent prosecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses and take measures to protect their constitutional rights. "We do not, however, know of any consequences of this request," the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses commented to Forum 18.

In early August, human rights organisation Memorial recognised the 29 Jehovah's Witnesses then known to be in custody or under house arrest as political prisoners. "We demand an immediate end to all persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses for their religious affiliation," Memorial

stated on its website on 3 August. They now list 41 Jehovah's Witnesses.

Memorial pointed out that the 2017 Supreme Court ruling "listed no examples of violation of public order by [Jehovah's Witnesses], manifestations of aggression or violence on their part, [or] evidence that their peaceful religious activities threatened the security of the Russian Federation and required measures to prevent it".

Muslims also targeted

Muslim readers of works by theologian Said Nursi are also prosecuted under "anti-extremism" legislation and have frequently been imprisoned or fined. 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 state permission to meet.

Four people have been convicted so far in 2018 of "continuing the activities" of banned "extremist" organisation "Nurdzhular" (which Muslims in Russia deny even exists). Two have begun serving their custodial sentences (one of them of eight years), one received a suspended sentence, and one received a fine. Two others are still on trial (see F18News 21 August 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2406).

Typical raids

The latest searches followed a now-familiar pattern. Law enforcement operatives from a variety of agencies, including armed men in masks and body armour, arrive at Jehovah's Witnesses' homes usually late at night or early in the morning. The occupants are sometimes made to lie on the floor or face the wall while the officers search their flats and houses. Officers then confiscate a similar range of possessions – electronic devices, bank cards, personal photographs, and books – and take the Jehovah's Witnesses, including children and the elderly, to a police station or Investigative Committee office for questioning.

Interrogations can last several hours, after which most people are released (some under travel restrictions). Others are kept in temporary detention until investigators decide whether to apply to a court for longer-term restrictive measures – they must do this within 48 hours of the initial detention.

A judge must then decide whether to grant an investigator's request to place an individual in detention or under house arrest. An initial period of detention/house arrest lasts for two months from the date the criminal case was opened (usually on or shortly before the date of the raid). Towards the end of this period, investigators must return to court if they wish to seek an extension. Detainees may appeal to a higher court to have these restrictive measures lifted or reduced – on occasion, such appeals may be successful.

Trials already underway

None of the cases initiated in 2018 has yet come to court. The trials of three Jehovah's

Witnesses charged with "extremism" offences not directly related to the 2017 nationwide ban are, however, already underway.

Dennis Ole Christensen – who has been in detention since May 2017 - has appeared 38 times so far at Oryol's Railway District Court. He is on trial under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 with "continuing the activities" of the Oryol Jehovah's Witness community, which was ruled "extremist" and liquidated by Oryol Regional Court in 2016 (see F18News 18 July 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297). His next hearing is due on 25 September. On 30 July, the judge extended Christensen's detention until 1 November.

Arkadya Akopovich Akopyan has undergone 20 hearings (the latest on 5 September) at Prokhladny District Court in Kabardino-Balkariya. He is charged under Criminal Code Article 282, Part 1 ("Actions directed at the incitement of hatred [nenavist] or enmity [vrazhda], as well as the humiliation of an individual or group of persons on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, attitude to religion, or social group").

Prosecutors accuse Akopyan of giving sermons which "degraded the dignity" of Orthodox and Muslim clergy, condoning Pussy Riot's demonstration in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012, and giving banned "extremist" literature to his community (see F18News 20 February 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2355).

Former Jehovah's Witness elder Yury Viktorovich Zalipayev has made three appearances so far at Maysky District Court (also in Kabardino-Balkariya) on charges under Criminal Code Article 280, Part 1 ("Public calls for extremist activity") and Article 282, Part 1 ("Actions directed at the incitement of hatred [nenavist] or enmity [vrazhda], as well as the humiliation of an individual or group of persons on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, attitude to religion, or social group"). His next hearing is due to take place on 17 September.

Zalipayev is accused of "inciting hatred towards Christian clergy" by allegedly giving his parishioners copies of a banned Jehovah's Witness magazine (see F18News 25 August 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2310).

Financial restrictions, harsh prison conditions

Twelve Jehovah's Witnesses appear on the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (apart from small transactions). Ten of these are among those arrested in 2018 as a direct result of the Supreme Court's 2017 liquidation ruling.

Conditions for those in pre-trial custody are "no different from those of other detainees", Jehovah's Witness spokesman Yaroslav Sivulsky commented to Forum 18 in July. Russian prisons and detention centres are notoriously harsh, however, and Sivulsky added on 11 September that lawyers had observed a number of problems: detainees are allowed to shower only once a week and to go for only short walks; they must sleep, eat, go to the toilet, and wash

their clothes in their cells, which have nowhere to dry laundry; the health of some detainees is deteriorating because of the damp and lack of fresh air, and some prisons do not offer proper medical care.

Although in most prisons the Jehovah's Witnesses have been permitted to read the Bible, lawyers claim that in certain others they have not, in violation of the law on prisoners' right to freedom of religion and belief.

Kamchatka: Yelizovo

In the town of Yelizovo, investigators have charged three people under Article 282.2, Part 1, all of whom are at liberty (though two are under travel restrictions).

Investigative Committee officials led at least three searches of Jehovah's Witness homes on 19 August, accompanied by armed troops of the Kamchatka Region National Guard. They initially detained a total of 11 people, the jw-russia.org news website reported on 22 August, including one who is underage. After "many hours" of questioning, most were released, but investigators sent Vera Ivanovna Zolotova (born 1946), Snezhana Yevgenyeva Bazhenova (born 1977), and Bazhenova's husband Konstantin Aleksandrovich Bazhenov (born 1977) to a temporary detention centre.

On 21 August, Judge Ruslan Maslov of Yelizovo District Court ordered that Bazhenov should be held in pre-trial custody until 18 October. On 29 August, however, Bazhenov was released by order of Judge Aleksey Ivankin of Kamchatka Regional Court (according to the court website), who decided to impose no further restrictive measures.

Bazhenova and Zolotova were released from the temporary detention centre on 21 August and investigators placed them under travel restrictions.

None of the three yet appears on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists".

In a press statement on 21 August, the Kamchatka Region Investigative Committee claimed that the searches of "dwellings of primary participants in the Jehovah's Witness religious association" "coincided with the moment of collective worship" and that "computer drives, printed items from the Federal List of Extremist Materials, and handwritten notes were seized".

The Investigative Committee confirmed in a further statement on 22 August that it was continuing to investigate a case under Article 282.2, Part 1, based on materials provided by the FSB and the Interior Ministry Centre for Countering Extremism. It claimed that the three accused (who are not named) "organised the activity" of the Jehovah's Witnesses between July 2017 and August 2018, and that Bazhenov, "as director of this religious organisation, repeatedly advised people at a lower religious level how to conduct themselves with law enforcement agents and had a strong moral influence on followers of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Yelizovo". It also accuses Bazhenov of "[imposing] his religious extremist beliefs on young parishioners and his underage daughter". According to the statement, Bazhenov has refused to cooperate with investigators.

According to federal tax records, Konstantin Bazhenov was not the chairman of Yelizovo's former registered Jehovah's Witness community, nor was he among the founder members. Snezhana Bazhenova and Vera Zolotova were also not founder members.

Forum 18 wrote to the Kamchatka Region Investigative Committee before the start of the Kamchatka working day on 4 September, asking why it deemed armed force to be necessary, why the Jehovah's Witnesses were considered dangerous, and why Konstantin Bazhenov needed to be held in pre-trial detention. No reply has been received.

Khabarovsk

FSB personnel and police raided four homes in the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk on 2 August. They took some occupants to a police station and others to the FSB's offices for questioning and fingerprinting, then released most of them, according to the jw-russia.org news website.

On 3 August, investigators had Valery Vasilyevich Moskalenko (born 1967) placed in pre-trial detention; he has been charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2. During the five-hour search of his home, his 83-year-old mother, who has heart problems, was taken ill and had to be called an ambulance, Jehovah's Witnesses claimed.

Moskalenko's name has not yet been added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists". His prison address is: Investigation Prison No. 1, ulitsa Znamenshchikova, 6, Khabarovsk 680038.

Moskalenko was not among the founder members of the registered Jehovah's Witness community in Khabarovsk which was liquidated as a result of the Supreme Court's ruling in 2017. He was, however, among those of the "Oblachnaya" community, also in Khabarovsk, which was dissolved in 2012.

Forum 18 wrote to the Khabarovsk Region FSB before the start of the Khabarovsk working day on 4 September, asking why it had thought it necessary to use armed force during the raids, and why it had been necessary to put Moskalenko in pre-trial detention. No reply has been received.

Kamchatka: Vilyuchinsk

Also in Kamchatka, "dozens" of armed FSB operatives and police in balaclavas carried out several raids on Jehovah's Witness homes in the town of Vilyuchinsk on 30 July, after the Investigative Committee opened a criminal case against a married couple. Both have been named as suspects under Article 282.2, Part 1 and Part 1.1, but are currently under no restrictive measures.

Officers took Mikhail Yuryevich Popov (born 1962) and his wife Yelena Vyacheslavovna (born 1963) to a temporary detention centre – on 1 August, Mikhail was placed in pre-trial detention and Yelena's temporary detention extended to 72 hours, later commuted to house arrest; their whereabouts remained unknown for some time, the jw-russia.org news website reported on 1

August.

After successful appeals at Kamchatka Regional Court, Mikhail Popov was released from detention on 9 August after 11 days behind bars, and Yelena Popova was released on 10 August after 4 days in detention and 7 days under house arrest.

Neither of the Popovs has so far been added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists". According to federal tax records, Mikhail Popov was among the founder members of Vilyuchinsk's former registered Jehovah's Witness community, but Yelena Popova was not.

Forum 18 wrote to the Kamchatka Region FSB and Investigative Committee before the start of the Kamchatka working day on 4 September, asking why armed officers had been deployed and why Mikhail Popov had been detained. No reply has been received.

Primorye: Nakhodka and Razdolnoye

Another man is in custody and has been charged under Article 282.2, Part 1 after armed law enforcement agents raided the home of his 90-year-old mother-in-law early in the morning of 28 July.

Dmitry Barmakin (born 1974) and his wife Yelena, who live in Crimea, had been visiting Yelena's mother in the town of Nakhodka to take care of her. Officers took both Dmitry and Yelena away for questioning; they then placed Dmitry in a temporary detention centre, from which he was transferred on 30 July to pre-trial custody by order of Judge Svetlana Barabash of Pervorechensk District Court in Vladivostok. He will be held until 27 September.

After interrogation, investigators released Yelana Barmakina without charge, but allegedly warned her that she would "be next", according to the jw-russia.org news website.

Dmitry Barmakin does not yet appear on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists". His prison address is: Investigation Prison No. 1, Partizansky prospekt, 28b, Vladivostok, 690106

Forum 18 wrote to the Primorye Region Investigative Committee before the start of its working day on 4 September, asking why armed force had been used and why investigators had thought it necessary to hold Dmitry Barmakin in pre-trial custody. No reply has been received.

Armed and masked law enforcement operatives, including FSB officers, had already raided the homes of several elderly people in the Primorye Region. During the searches in Razdolnoye village on 19 July, they allegedly struck one 75-year-old man in the face and forced him to lie on the floor; in another flat, another over-70 had a fit and had to be taken by ambulance to intensive care, Jehovah's Witnesses claim.

After the searches had seized the Jehovah's Witnesses' phones and computers, they took some people away for several hours of questioning. A criminal case has been opened, Jehovah's Witness spokesman Yaroslav Sivulsky told Forum 18 on 4 September, but nobody is

known to have been charged or named as a suspect, and nobody from Razdolnoye has been placed in detention or under other restrictive measures.

Forum 18 wrote to the Primorye Region Investigative Committee before the start of its working day on 4 September, asking why armed officers had been deployed, in what way Jehovah's Witness pensioners could be considered dangerous, and whether officers had indeed struck the elderly man. No reply has been received.

Kostroma

Kostroma saw three armed raids by riot police on Jehovah's Witness homes on 25 July, during which at least one front door was broken down, computer equipment and bibles were confiscated, and Sergey Alekseyevich Rayman (born 1996) and Valeriya Aleksandrovna Rayman (born 1993) taken away for interrogation and later placed in a temporary detention centre. They have now been charged under Article 282.2, Part 1 and Part 2 respectively.

On 26 July, Sverdlovsk District Court placed Sergey Rayman in pre-trial detention for two months. On 27 July, investigators released Valeriya Rayman under specific restrictive conditions – she is not allowed to go out at night, use the internet, telephone, or postal service, or talk to anybody else involved in the case.

Neither has yet been added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists".

Sergey Rayman's prison address is: Investigation Prison No. 1, ulitsa Sovetskaya, 88, Kostroma 156005

In a statement on 2 August, Kostroma Regional Investigative Committee accused the Raymans (whom it does not name) of "conducting illegal activity by organising and carrying out gatherings of members of the Jehovah's Witness local religious organisation of Kostroma". In June 2018, the statement continues, "at least two meetings of participants of this religious organisation were organised and conducted by the suspects at their place of residence. At the meetings held by the participants of the liquidated religious organisation, the ideology of this association and propaganda of its activities were discussed".

Neither of the Raymans appears among the founder members of Kostroma's former registered Jehovah's Witness community, according to federal tax records.

A member of staff in the Investigative Committee's investigation department told Forum 18 on 13 September that inquiries about the case should be directed to the press service. When Forum 18 telephoned press service director Olga Vakurova, she said questions could be accepted only by fax.

Kemerovo Region: Beryozovsky

FSB operatives searched at least three homes in Beryozovsky in Kemerovo Region on 22 July – at one address, they stormed the flat from the balcony, despite the fact that the householder

had already opened the door to another group of officers, according to the jw-russia.org news website. Investigators took the Jehovah's Witnesses for questioning at the FSB's offices in Kemerovo.

On 24 July, Judge Natalya Naumova of Kemerovo's Central District Court ordered that Sergey Alekseyevich Britvin (born 1965) and Vadim Anatolyevich Levchuk (born 1972) should be kept in pre-trial detention until 19 September. Investigators have named both men as suspects in a criminal case opened under Article 282.2, Part 2.

Neither yet appears in on the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists". Their prison address is: Investigation Prison No. 1, Kuznetsky prospekt, 174, Kemerovo 650993

Forum 18 wrote to the Kemerovo Region FSB before the start of its working day on 4 September, asking why armed force had been considered necessary and why Britvin and Levchuk had been detained.. No reply has been received.

Vadim Levchuk was the chairman of Beryozovsky's former registered Jehovah's Witness community, according to federal tax records. Sergey Britvin does not appear among the community's founder members.

Amur Region: Blagoveshchensk

The FSB also led searches of the homes of at least three people in Blagoveshchensk on 20 July, beginning at 7am. One man, Dmitry Mikhailovich Golik (born 26 March 1987) has been charged under Article 282.2, Part 2 and placed under travel restrictions.

The jw-russia.org news website reported on 23 July that the FSB had had a listening device in Golik's home for almost six months: "Such unceremonious intrusion into private life, the violation of the right to inviolability of the home, [and] personal and family secrets, has become possible as part of the brutal persecution unleashed against Jehovah's Witnesses".

Golik claims that, according to investigators, there was also a camera in his flat and that they were "aware of everything that went on".

Forum 18 wrote to the Amur Region FSB before the start of its working day on 4 September, asking why it had considered it necessary to bug Golik's flat. No reply has been received.

Dmitry Golik does not appear among the founder members of Blagoveshchensk's former registered Jehovah's Witness community (a man who appears to be his father does).

Penza

Investigators have charged four men in Penza under Article 282.2, Part 1 and Article 282.2, Part 2, after police and Investigative Committee personnel conducted simultaneous raids on four homes on 15 July.

Officers seized electronic devices, photographs, and documents, and took about 40 people to police stations for questioning, leaving their children at home alone. Jehovah's Witnesses say they were "humiliated and intimidated" by the process – one female investigator allegedly made six women undress completely for "personal searches".

After interrogations which lasted past midnight, most people were released, but Vladimir Aleksandrovich Alushkin (born 1964), Vladimir Aleksandrovich Kulyasov (born 1974), Andrei Aleksandrovich Magliv (born 1984), and Denis Vladimirovich Timoshin (born 1980) were all sent to a temporary detention centre for 48 hours.

Later, investigators charged Alushkin under Article 282.2, Part 1 and had him placed in pre-trial custody until 14 September. Kulyasov, Magliv, and Timoshin were all charged under Article 282.2, Part 2 and placed under house arrest.

None of the four has yet been added to the Rosfinmonitoring "List of Terrorists and Extremists". Alushkin's prison address is: Investigation Prison No. 1, ulitsa Karakozova, 30, Penza 440039

In a statement on 8 August, Penza Region Investigative Committee asserted that Alushkin, "knowing with certainty" that the Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre had been liquidated and Jehovah's Witness activities banned as extremist, "from July 2017 to July 2018, resumed and organised the activities of the local religious organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses 'Arbekovo, Penza'".

"This organisation promoted the superiority of followers of Jehovah's Witness teachings over other people, a negative assessment of [non-Jehovah's Witnesses] and the prompting of a break in family relations with them, [and] an appeal to refuse medical intervention, including emergency intervention to save human life", the statement continues. Investigators allege that Alushkin managed the activities of the "'Arbekovo, Penza' Jehovah's Witness cell", "distributed responsibilities among its participants and exercised control over them, gave instructions on the involvement of new participants from among their relatives and friends and on the dissemination of the extremist organisation's ideology and beliefs among Penza residents by means of the relevant literature, and received reports on the work done and money in the form of donations from participants".

"In turn, participants in the extremist organisation... carried out work aimed at professing and propagating the corresponding ideology and faith: for the purpose of propaganda, they held conversations with Penza residents in public places and residential quarters, participated in secret meetings and other activities carried out by this organisation, and paid cash in the form of contributions".

According to federal tax records, Alushkin was not the chair of the former "Arbekovo, Penza" registered Jehovah's Witness community and does not appear among its founder members – nor were any of the other three men charged on its committee.

A spokeswoman for Penza Regional Investigative Committee directed Forum 18 to call Lieutenant Colonel Andrei Chepanov, head of the First Department for the Investigation of

Particularly Important Cases of Crimes against the Person and Public Security. When Forum 18 telephoned Colonel Chepanov and asked to discuss the criminal case against the Jehovah's Witnesses, he said he could not comment over the phone and immediately ended the call.

Some earlier detainees transferred to house arrest

In Orenburg, Vladimir Kochnyov and Aleksandr Suvorov were released from pre-trial detention on 3 August, after 78 days, by order of Judge Inna Yangubayeva of the city's Lenin District Court. Both men are now under house arrest.

In Magadan, Konstantin Petrov was released from pre-trial custody on 3 August after a judge at Magadan Regional Court upheld his appeal against his detention. He too has been placed under house arrest. (END)