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8 Jehovah's Witnesses Charged With 'Extremism' in Russia's Jewish Region

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Birobidzhan, a city in the Jewish autonomous district, was among a handful of cities to label the Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" group in 2016. The next year, Russia's Supreme Court followed suit. **Michael Tapp / Flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0)**

Authorities in Russia's Far East have charged eight Jehovah's Witnesses with extremism earlier this month, bringing the number of worshippers facing criminal prosecution there to 22, the religious organization said Tuesday.

Birobidzhan, a city in the Jewish autonomous district, was among a handful of cities to label the Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" group in 2016. A year later, Russia's Supreme Court declared the religious group to be "extremist" and banned its estimated 400 branches across the country.

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The regional Federal Security Service (FSB) branch accuses the eight believers of "renewing

the activities of the abolished local religious organization" in Birobidzhan, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia said in a statement.

They face a maximum prison sentence of six years if their case reaches the court and they are found guilty.

Five of the defendants' husbands and fathers are already facing extremism charges in Birobidzhan, the organization said. Trials are underway for two of the defendants.

At least nine Jehovah's Witnesses have been given prison sentences in Russia since the group was banned in 2017. Authorities carried out hundreds of raids and several Jehovah's Witnesses allege that law enforcement officers tortured them in detention.

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