

Jehovah's Witnesses in

Russia

Religious Freedom Concerns

Statement by the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw

19-30 September 2016

Russian authorities continue to attack the peaceful religious worship of Jehovah's Witnesses. The Witnesses are being persecuted on the charge of "extremist activity" merely for attending religious services and talking to others about their faith.

- **Prosecutor General threatens to liquidate national office of Jehovah's Witnesses.**

On **2 March 2016**, the Prosecutor General's Office issued an official warning, threatening to close the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. If this threat is carried out, the Administrative Centre will be liquidated, it will be added to the Federal List of Extremist Organisations, and its property will be turned over to the State.

On **12 October 2016**, the Tver District Court of Moscow will hear the Witnesses' appeal against the Prosecutor General's warning letter.

- **Amendments to the Federal Law on Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations (Religion Law) restrict religious activity.**

On **20 July 2016**, the amendments to the Religion Law entered into force.

Since then, Russian authorities have stepped up their harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses by charging the Witnesses with administrative violations and by raiding religious meetings.

- **Russian court sends *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* for "expert study" under charges that it contains "extremist" language.**

On **26 April 2016**, the judge of the Vyborg City Court sent the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, published by Jehovah's Witnesses, for an "expert study" in response to the prosecutor's claim to declare it "extremist." This violates Article 3.1 of the Federal Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity, which forbids the application of legislation on extremism to sacred texts. The "expert study" is still in progress.

- **The Rostov Regional Court upheld the decision to criminally convict 16 of Jehovah's Witnesses in Taganrog for their religious activity.**

Abuses and Restrictions of Religious Freedom

Warning Issued to the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

On **2 March 2016**, the Prosecutor General's Office issued an official warning, threatening to close the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

- If this threat is carried out, the Administrative Centre will be liquidated, it will be added to the Federal List of Extremist Organisations, and its property will be turned over to the State.
- Because of their affiliation with the Centre, all religious associations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia—401 local religious organisations (legal entities) and over 2,500 congregations—may also face liquidation.
 - As a result, Witnesses throughout Russia could lose their Kingdom Halls (houses of worship).
 - Ultimately, liquidation of the Administrative Centre could deprive the Witnesses of their right to practice their religious beliefs.

Criminalization of Peaceful Religious Worship

[Sixteen of Jehovah's Witnesses in Taganrog were criminally convicted under charges of extremism for organising and attending peaceful religious meetings.](#)

On **30 November 2015**, Judge Vasyutchenko of the Taganrog City Court ruled to sentence four of Jehovah's Witnesses to five-and-a-half-year prison terms and issued heavy fines of RUB 100,000 (EUR 1,373) each. They were convicted for organising religious meetings. The other 12 were fined, ranging from RUB 20,000 to 70,000 (EUR 260 to 920), for attending these religious meetings. However, the judge immediately suspended the sentences and waived the fines. The effect of the suspension is yet to be determined.

On **17 March 2016**, the Rostov Regional Court upheld the decision of the Taganrog City Court. The court lowered the fines of 12 of the 16 defendants to RUB 10,000 (EUR 130) as a nominal mitigation of the punishment. However, the court did not lower the fines on the four Witnesses who were charged with "organising the activity of an extremist organisation."

Interference With Religious Services

Between January and August 2016, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 30 cases of police raids on Kingdom Halls or on other meeting places.

- At least six of these raids have occurred **since 20 July 2016**, when the new amendments to the Religion Law became effective.
- During many of these raids, law-enforcement officials planted the Witnesses' religious literature that is posted on the Federal List of Extremist Materials (FLEM) so that they could discover it later as "evidence" to frame the Witnesses as scofflaws.

The following are two examples:

- **Samara Region, Chapayevsk.** On **24 August 2016**, Special Police Forces (OMON) and about ten other police officers raided a Kingdom Hall just after a religious meeting had ended. They shouted, "Everybody get on the floor!" The police forced all in attendance to stay on the floor while they conducted a search of the premises. The police planted and "discovered" several Witness publications that are posted on the FLEM. The police

questioned everyone in attendance and seized personal belongings. They also seized a laptop, a video camera, and an MP3 player that belonged to the Kingdom Hall.

- **Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk.** On **28 July 2016**, OMON officers raided a Kingdom Hall and disrupted a religious meeting. The officers were armed and wore masks and bulletproof vests. They yelled at everyone in attendance: “Get on the floor! Hands on your heads!” Then they physically forced all of the men to lie face down on the floor and called them up one by one for questioning. Some of the men were forced to stay lying on the floor for almost an hour. An elderly female Witness fell ill, but for 20 minutes the police refused to allow the Witnesses to call an ambulance. The police also planted some of the Witnesses’ religious publications that are on the FLEM and later “discovered” them. In violation of the law, the officials never showed the Witnesses a court order authorizing the raid and search of the premises.

Interference With Manifestation of Belief

Between January and August 2016, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 64 cases in which police officers arrested Witnesses who were talking to others about their beliefs.

- **Kaliningrad.** In **August 2016**, authorities charged four Witnesses with unlawful missionary activity under the Code of Administrative Violations Article 5.26, based on the new amendments to the Religion Law.

Restrictions Resulting From Religious Beliefs

- **Arkhangelsk Region.** On **28 June 2016**, lawmakers filed a claim with the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor General to ban Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia.
- **Nizhniy Novgorod, Nizhegorod Region.** On **9 April 2016**, the deputy governor sent a letter “on the activity of a religious organisation” to heads of the administration of municipal districts and urban districts in the Nizhegorod Region. The letter requested that the district law-enforcement agencies and the Ministry for Internal Regional and Municipal Policies of the Nizhegorod Region be immediately notified of any incident in which literature of Jehovah’s Witnesses is distributed in the municipality’s territory.

Between January and August 2016, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that authorities conducted searches of 34 homes and Kingdom Halls.

- **Republic of Tartarstan.** Eighteen searches occurred on **24 March 2016**, when authorities searched homes and places of worship in the cities of Almetyevsk, Zainsk, Zelenodolsk, Kazan, Neberezhnye Chelny, Nizhnekamsk, and the village of Kukmor.

The authorities initiated a criminal case under Article 239(1) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation for “creation of a non-profit organisation that infringes on the person and rights of citizens.”

Legal Recognition Revoked by Liquidation of Local Religious Organisations (LROs)

Prior to 2016, Russian authorities had liquidated LROs of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Taganrog, Samara, and Abinsk.

- On **7 July 2016**, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation upheld a lower court decision to liquidate the Elista LRO of Jehovah’s Witnesses. In June and December 2015, local police searched the Kingdom Hall in Elista. They planted and then “discovered” Witness literature that is posted on the FLEM. Using the fabricated evidence, the prosecutor of the Republic of Kalmykia filed a claim to liquidate the Elista LRO.

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- On **16 June 2016**, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation upheld a lower court decision to liquidate the Stariy Oskol LRO of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- On **9 June 2016**, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation upheld a lower court decision to liquidate the Belgorod LRO of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Current liquidation cases pending:

- On **2 September 2016**, the Russian Federation Ministry of Justice filed a claim to liquidate the Birobidzhan LRO and to suspend its activity until the court proceedings conclude. The first liquidation hearing will be on **27 September 2016**.
- In **May 2016**, the Ministry of Justice filed a claim to liquidate the Orel LRO. On **14 June 2016**, the Orel Regional Court ruled to liquidate the LRO as an "extremist" organisation. The Witnesses have appealed to the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation.

Most of the liquidated LROs have been added to the Federal List of Extremist Organisations. These include the Taganrog, Samara, Abinsk, Belgorod, and Stariy Oskol LROs.

State Censorship of Religious Literature

Based on so-called expert studies, Russian courts have ruled in favour of prosecutors and have declared 88 religious publications of Jehovah's Witnesses to be "extremist." These publications are posted on the FLEM.

- In 2010, authorities revoked the Witnesses' permit to import and distribute *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* in Russia. *The Watchtower* has been in print since 1879, and the two publications are the most widely circulated magazines in the world.
- Since March 2015, officials have refused to allow any shipments of religious literature from Jehovah's Witnesses to enter the country.
- Since July 2015 the Witnesses' official website, jw.org, has been banned in Russia, making it difficult for anyone within Russia to obtain Witness publications electronically. Promoting the website is a criminal offense.
- In early **2016**, a prosecutor in Vyborg filed a claim to have the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, a Bible published by the Witnesses, declared "extremist."

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Physical Assaults

Between January and August 2016, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 13 cases of physical assault.

- **11 March 2016**, St. Petersburg. During a religious service at a Kingdom Hall, a man with a dog attempted to set the dog on the attendees. He shouted insults at everyone and attacked one individual. He also damaged the entrance door to the hall and smashed a window.
- **14 March 2016**, Moscow. While two male Witnesses were talking to others about their beliefs, aggressive individuals assaulted them, threatened them with a knife, and inflicted bodily injuries on one of the Witnesses.

Vandalism and Arson

Between January and August 2016, Jehovah's Witnesses reported eight attacks on Kingdom Halls—including a case of arson and an improvised explosive device that authorities removed.

- **City of Artem, Primorskiy Territory.** On **6 August 2016**, just before a religious meeting was about to begin in a Kingdom Hall, the Witnesses smelled a strong chemical odour. Upon investigation, they found a home-made bomb on the side of the building. It was a canister that had been filled with poisonous gas and attached to the building's ventilation system. Along with the bomb was a typewritten note stating: "Jehovah's Witnesses. Soon we will come to your homes. Run away rats, or else welcome to HELL." The Witnesses evacuated the building immediately and called the authorities, who disposed of the bomb.

Negative Media

Nearly every week Russian media publicises slanderous reports about Jehovah's Witnesses, which negatively influence public opinion.

Religious Freedom Objectives

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the Russian Federation to:

- (1) Cease misapplying legislation on extremism to the peaceful worship of Jehovah's Witnesses
- (2) Rescind the Warning issued to the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses
- (3) Remove religious publications from the Federal List of Extremist Materials
- (4) Ensure that Jehovah's Witnesses can peacefully enjoy freedom of religion and assembly without interference
- (5) Enforce media standards prohibiting libel and slander

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue with representatives of the Russian government.

For more information:

Please contact the Office of General Counsel of Jehovah's Witnesses at generalcounsel@jw.org

Scan the QR code to learn more about legal developments and human rights affecting Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

