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# Jehovah's Witnesses in Certain Territories in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions of Ukraine

## Religious Freedom Concerns

Statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw

19-30 September 2016

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- Jehovah's Witnesses suffer persecution, arbitrary abduction, and torture in certain territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Eastern Ukraine. Independent groups of armed men carry out most of this mistreatment.
- Eleven Kingdom Halls of Jehovah's Witnesses (houses of worship) have been seized in the towns of Horlivka, Perevalsk, Krasnyi Luch, Telmanove, Yenakieve, and Brianka and in the city of Donetsk. As a result of the misapplication of the recently adopted Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations, two Kingdom Halls were seized in the town of Horlivka in July 2016.
- Local law-enforcement authorities refuse to investigate the reports of hate crimes or the actions of armed groups.

## Abuses and Restrictions of Religious Freedom

### Interference With Manifestation of Belief

On **14 July 2016**, the DPR Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations was adopted by the parliament of the DPR and came into effect. The law proclaims freedom of religion and stipulates the right to practice one's religion in private or together with others and to conduct religious services. It also guarantees alternative service if military service conflicts with one's religious beliefs (Article 3). At the same time, the law obligates all existing religious communities, with the exception of the Russian Orthodox Church, to register legally in the DPR and forbids their activity without this registration (Section 2). The authorities are given a wide range of authority in issuing registration permits (Article 12).

Local authorities imposed restrictions on religious freedom on earlier occasions.

- (1) **Town of Dokuchaievsk.** On **24 June 2016**, a representative of the Ministry of State Security named Vitaliy prohibited local Jehovah's Witnesses from "engaging in their

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education activities, that is, conversing with people on religious subjects” beyond the territory of the Kingdom Hall. He said that the Witnesses caught engaging in this activity would be arrested and detained for 30 days.

(2) **Town of Makiivka.** On **8 June 2016**, a representative of the Traffic Patrol Department named K. S. Borokhoi, accompanied by a representative of the police unit Berkut, stopped the car of a local Witness. After literature of Jehovah’s Witnesses was found on the passenger seat, the owner of the vehicle was arrested and taken to the local police station. He was accused of transporting illegal “American junk” prohibited in the territory of the DPR. The Witness was allowed to return home at 11:00 p.m., but all of the literature was confiscated.

### Abductions and Torture

During the last year, 15 of Jehovah’s Witnesses, including some elderly members, were abducted and tortured. Besides the physical abuse, those abducted were subjected to psychological pressure, including staged executions. The victims were punished because they are not members of the Orthodox Church and because of their conscientious objection to military service. When they were freed, they were strictly forbidden to continue their religious activity or to spread their religious beliefs. On many occasions, local officials ordered Jehovah’s Witnesses to stop their religious activity under threat of arrests and fines.



**PAVLO VIACHESLAVOVICH DMITRIEV**  
Born in 1997, one of Jehovah’s Witnesses since 2008, single, studying at Horlivka Industrial College



**SERHII VIKTOROVYCH RAKITA**  
Born in 1967, one of Jehovah’s Witnesses since 1999, married, two children, self-employed



**OLEKSANDR GRYGORIIOVYCH STADNIK**  
Born in 1982, one of Jehovah’s Witnesses since 1999, single, millwright at the Horlivka Heating Company

(1) **Town of Horlivka.** On **17 January 2016**, at 10:40 a.m., three armed men in camouflage uniforms and balaclavas burst into the Kingdom Hall at 2 Volkova Street. Their commander arrested 19-year-old Pavlo Dmitriev and 33-year-old Oleksandr Stadnik and ordered them to follow him. The approximately 30 others present were ordered to disperse. Over the next hour, the Kingdom Hall was searched, and all of the religious literature of Jehovah’s Witnesses was confiscated as “extremist.” Serhii Rakita, 49 years old, was also arrested.

The Combating Organized Crime Unit later stated that all three detainees were placed in a temporary detention facility in Donetsk because of their “involvement with an extremist organization whose activity is prohibited in the territory of the Donetsk Peoples Republic by the order of the Head of the Republic.” The families of the three men were unable to learn the name of the investigator responsible for the decision to detain the men and were unable to challenge the arrest.

On **30 January 2016**, all three were transferred to a facility in Makiivka, where they were held until their release on **16 February 2016** without ever being informed of the reasons for their arrest.

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#### Seizure of Houses of Worship

Throughout these territories in 2014 through mid-2016, armed men seized 18 Kingdom Halls belonging to Jehovah's Witnesses; 11 of the buildings remain in the possession of armed groups.

(1) **Horlivka.** On **25 July 2016**, armed men arrested 46-year-old Volodymyr Popkov, an elder in a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. Referring to the newly published DPR Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations, they stated that the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses is prohibited and that they were therefore confiscating the Kingdom Hall at 9 Simferopolska Street. Mr Popkov was taken to the Combating Organized Crime Unit, interrogated, and threatened that if he did not stop his religious activity, he would be shot. That evening, the Kingdom Hall was plundered by armed men. All the chairs, the furniture, and the audio and video equipment were removed. Local police refused to respond to the victims' crime reports.

(2) On **22 July 2016**, during the religious service in a Kingdom Hall at 105-A Vitchyzniana Street, Horlivka, five armed men intruded and ordered all 60 people in attendance to disperse and vacate the building immediately. The men stated that Jehovah's Witnesses are a forbidden religion.

An elder of the community, 53-year-old Oleksandr Ihnashov, a diabetic, was arrested and taken to the Combating Organized Crime Unit. He was interrogated and informed of the seizure of the Kingdom Hall, allegedly by the order of the head of the Republic, and was released late that night.



#### Societal Abuses and Discrimination

##### Hate Speech

Local mass media depicts the religious activity of Jehovah's Witnesses as unlawful and dangerous to society.

- On **17 November 2015**, the Deputy Head of the People's Council of DPR, Olga Makeeva, made a blatantly false claim on the TK Union TV channel that Jehovah's Witnesses are directly involved in terrorist attacks and the murder of civilians.

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### Religious Freedom Objectives

**Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the authorities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine to:**

- (1) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to carry out their worship peacefully, including their volunteer community service of talking to their neighbours about God's Word
- (2) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to assemble peacefully for worship
- (3) Return all illegally seized Kingdom Halls (houses of worship)
- (4) Legally register the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses, in harmony with the European Convention on Human Rights

### For more information:

Please contact the Office of General Counsel of Jehovah's Witnesses at [generalcounsel@jw.org](mailto:generalcounsel@jw.org)

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