

# Ukraine

ENGLISH only

## Certain Territories in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions

### Religious Freedom Concerns

Statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting, Vienna

14 and 15 April 2016

Jehovah's Witnesses suffer persecution 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

### Harassment and Physical Assaults

During the last year, 15 Jehovah's Witnesses, including the elderly, were abducted and tortured. Besides the physical abuse, those abducted experienced psychological pressure, staged executions, etc. The victims were punished because of their "wrong" religious beliefs, in an attempt to force them to join their army. When they were freed, they were strictly forbidden to continue their religious activity or spread their religious beliefs.

On many occasions local officials ordered Jehovah's Witnesses to stop their religious activity. They threatened that the "disobedient" would face arrests and fines.

- On **29 September 2015**, a group of people belonging to a Donetsk sports club came to the Kingdom Hall in the town of Shakhtarsk. Members of the group put signs on the facade of the Kingdom Hall: "Away with the Sect!," "No place for sects in DPR (Donetsk People's Republic)," and similar. The Chief of the Shakhtarsk Town Police was present but was silent during the "protest," thus giving tacit approval of the group's actions.
- On **21 September 2015**, two representatives of the Vuhlehirsk commandant's office ordered the local religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses to stop their religious activity until there is new legislation on religion.



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#### Arrests

- **Town of Horlivka.** On **17 January 2016**, at about 10:40 a.m., three men entered the house of worship of Jehovah's Witnesses. They were armed and wearing camouflage uniforms with balaclavas covering their faces. The commander pointed at 19 year-old Pavel Dmitriev and 33 year-old Aleksandr Stadnik, and ordered them to follow him out. He ordered the other attendees (about 30 people) to leave the building. The requests by the mothers of the young men not to take their sons fell on deaf ears. When the mothers asked the reason for their arrest, the commander's answer was: "That's life." The armed men then searched the building for an hour. All religious literature (dozens of kilograms) was confiscated and labeled as 'extremist.' Later, the armed men arrested 49 year-old Sergey Rakita.



**PAVEL  
VIACHESLAVOVICH  
DMITRIEV**

Born in 1997,  
one of Jehovah's  
Witnesses since  
2008, single,  
studying at  
Horlivka  
Industrial College



**SERGEY  
VIKTOROVICH  
RAKITA**

Born in 1967,  
one of Jehovah's  
Witness since  
1999, married,  
two children,  
self-employed



**ALEKSANDR  
GRIGORIEVICH  
STADNIK**

Born in 1982,  
one of Jehovah's  
Witnesses since  
1999, single,  
millwright at the  
Horlivka Heating  
Company

Only on the following day did the families learn information on the whereabouts of those arrested. A representative of the Counter Organized Crime Unit (COCU) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the DPR stated that all three were held in the Temporary Detention Facility (TDF) in Donetsk for their "participation in the extremist activity of an organization which is forbidden, on the territory of DPR, according to the decree of the Head of the Republic."

Relatives of the arrested men filed dozens of complaints with different agencies to challenge the arrest and to learn the name of the investigator on the case.

On **1 February 2016**, the DPR's Head Military Prosecutor informed the families that all three were to remain under arrest for 30 days, according to the unpublished decree of the Council of Ministers of the DPR "On Immediate Measures for Protecting People against Brigandage and Other Organized Crimes." He also informed them that the case was with an investigator of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) of the DPR. A few weeks later, the MSS disclaimed this information and stated that it was not aware of the whereabouts of P. Dmitriev, A. Stadnik, and S. Rakita, or the fact of their arrest.

On **16 February 2016**, all three Witness men were released from the TDF in Makiivka, without explanation. Until now, those arrested do not know the reason for their arrest nor the results of the "investigation."

#### Seizure of Houses of Worship

Throughout these territories in 2014 and early 2015, armed men seized 17 Kingdom Halls (houses of worship) belonging to Jehovah's Witnesses. At present, nine of the buildings remain in the possession of armed groups.

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### 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 murder of civilians.

### 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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