

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS

STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN
ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S
CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

OFFICE OF GENERAL COUNSEL
WORLD HEADQUARTERS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

OSCE Human
Dimension
Implementation
Meeting, Warsaw

11-22 SEPTEMBER 2017

ON 20 APRIL 2017, THE SUPREME COURT ruled to liquidate all legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, terminate their activity, and confiscate their property. The decision effectively banned the peaceful worship of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country.

Authorities are violating the Witnesses' fundamental freedoms and criminalizing their religious activities. At the same time, some Russian citizens interpret the decision as a

license to discriminate against the Witnesses and even to subject them to hate crimes.

The Appellate Chamber of the Supreme Court heard the Witnesses' appeal on **17 July** and affirmed the **20 April** decision. The decision raises concern that the State-sponsored persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses will intensify.

Will Russia imprison 175,000 of its citizens merely for practicing their faith?

Jehovah's Witnesses are now labeled as "extremist" and are persecuted in Russia.

TIMELINE 2017

15 March

Ministry of Justice issues a directive to suspend immediately the activity of the Administrative Centre and all 395 Local Religious Organisations of Jehovah's Witnesses. The directive immediately bans the religious activity of Jehovah's Witnesses until the Supreme Court's decision

17 July

Appellate Chamber of the Russian Federation Supreme Court hears the appeal of Jehovah's Witnesses and affirms the 20 April 2017 decision of the Supreme Court

17 August

Ministry of Justice adds the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to its official list of extremist organisations

20 April

Russian Federation Supreme Court rules [1] to liquidate the Administrative Centre in Russia and 395 Local Religious Organisations, [2] to confiscate their property, and [3] to terminate all their activity

25 May

Dennis Christensen, a citizen of Denmark, is arrested at religious services of Jehovah's Witnesses and jailed in pre-trial detention in Oryol, Russia. He is the first Witness imprisoned for his faith in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union

17 August

Vyborg City Court declares that the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, published by Jehovah's Witnesses, is not a Bible but is "extremist" literature

Russia

Russian authorities have banned the peaceful religious worship of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. They justify the persecution of the Witnesses by characterizing the practice of their faith as extremist activity.

Russian Federation Supreme Court ruled to liquidate the national office of Jehovah's Witnesses and 395 local religious organisations.

- **On 20 April 2017**, the Russian Federation Supreme Court ruled to liquidate the Witnesses' legal entities and terminate all activity of those entities throughout Russia.
- **On 17 July 2017**, the Appellate Chamber of the Russian Federation Supreme Court upheld the 20 April decision.
- **On 17 August 2017**, the Ministry of Justice added the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to its list of organisations banned in Russia.

Sovietskiy District Court of Oryol is holding a Danish citizen in pretrial detention for six months, alleging that by meeting for worship, the Witnesses have committed the crime of continuing the activity of an extremist organisation.

- **On 25 May 2017**, heavily armed police officers and agents of the Federal Security Service (FSB) disrupted a peaceful religious service of Jehovah's Witnesses in Oryol, Russia.
- **The officers** arrested Dennis Christensen, a Danish citizen and a congregation elder. He is being held until **23 November 2017** to allow the prosecutor opportunity to build a case against him and others. If convicted, Mr. Christensen faces a six to ten year prison term.

Vyborg City Court ruled that the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures is not a Bible but is extremist literature

On 17 August 2017, the Vyborg City Court declared that the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, published by Jehovah's Witnesses, is not a Bible but is actually extremist literature. In this way the prosecutor seeks to circumvent the law, as established in Article 3.1 of the Federal Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity, which forbids the application of that law to sacred texts. Jehovah's Witnesses are appealing the ruling.

The ban exposes Jehovah's Witnesses to administrative or criminal liability for engaging in their religious activity. The extent to which the Russian government will persecute Jehovah's Witnesses for engaging in worship remains to be seen. However, there is already an increase in administrative and criminal cases initiated against Jehovah's Witnesses for practicing their faith.

Abuses and Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Supreme Court of the Russian Federation Bans and Liquidates the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and all of their Local Religious Organisations

On 20 April 2017, the Supreme Court criminalized the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. Judge Yuriy Grigoryevich Ivanenko ruled in favor of the claim filed by the Ministry of Justice "to liquidate the religious organisation 'Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia' and the local religious organisations that are part of its structure [and] to turn over to the Russian Federation all property of the liquidated religious organisation."

✎ **Judge Ivanenko** added that, effective immediately, the decision terminated all activity of the Witnesses' legal entities throughout Russia.

On 17 July 2017, the Appellate Chamber of the Supreme Court confirmed the 20 April ruling, effectively banning Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

RESTRICTIONS RESULTING FROM RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Between September 2016 and August 2017, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 33 cases of interference in the worship and personal lives of the Witnesses.

✎ **In most of these cases**, officers of government agencies raided the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses, often carrying out unauthorized and illegal search and seizure of private belongings.

✎ **In at least six cases**, officers stormed homes with large numbers of officers; in at least five cases, officers planted "extremist" literature to fabricate charges against the Witnesses. They also broke into homes, often did not declare their purpose or show a court order, and ordered people around at gunpoint.

✎ **19 January 2017**, Saratov Region, city of Novouzensk. Eight law enforcement officers of the police, the FSB, and the prosecutor's office came to a family home of Jehovah's Witnesses. An operational-investigative activity of the home was conducted from 6:45 p.m. until 5 a.m. Officers confiscated religious literature and personal belongings.

✎ **21 February 2017**, Stavropol Territory, city of Mikhaylovsk. At 6:20 a.m., several cars with police officers arrived at the home of a Witness family. In advance, officers had the electricity to the whole street disconnected (at about 4 a.m.). About ten people entered the house, including investigators of the Centre for Counteracting Extremism and the FSB. Officers used the flashlight of a mobile phone to show the family a court order authorising the operational-investigative activity in their home. It was dark inside the home, and therefore impossible to see the police officers

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The Supreme Court's decision puts the safety and welfare of over 175,000 of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia at great risk.

and observe all their movements. Officers began a search in the attic and storage room and immediately “found” literature that is on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Additionally, the purse of the homeowner’s wife, which was in the foyer, was “found” full of “extremist” publications. The family stated that the literature had been planted illegally.

INTERFERENCE WITH RELIGIOUS SERVICES

Between September 2016 and August 2017, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 39 cases of police raids on Kingdom Halls or on other meeting places.

- ✎ **In almost all cases**, the police officers disrupted religious services in progress or denied the Witnesses the opportunity to conduct their scheduled services. In many cases, the officers questioned those in attendance, recorded their identification information, and photographed or video recorded them.
- ✎ **In 13 cases**, officers planted “extremist” literature to fabricate charges against the Witnesses; in 5 cases they initiated charges for engaging in missionary activity.

INTERFERENCE WITH MANIFESTATION OF BELIEF

Between September 2016 and August 2017, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 63 cases in which police officers arrested Witnesses who were talking to others about their beliefs. Police generally detained them at the police station for a time and often initiated an administrative case against the Witnesses for engaging in missionary activity.

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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 Federal List of Extremist Materials (FLEM).

On 17 August 2017, the Vyborg City Court declared extremist the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, published by Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Russian language. This decision marks the first time that the Bible has been banned in a country that claims to be Christian.

The day before, the Vyborg City Court resumed its hearing of the case, which had been adjourned since April 2016 after the judge ruled in favor of the Leningrad-Finlyandskiy Transport Prosecutor’s claim to appoint an expert study to declare the New World Translation to be extremist. After numerous delays, the study was completed and submitted to the court on **22 June 2017**. The study concluded that the Bible is extremist literature, following the same pattern as previous court-appointed studies of the Witnesses’ publications by so-called experts.

The study claims that the New World Translation is “not a Bible.” This is actually an attempt to circumvent the Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity, which prohibits declaring sacred texts, such as the Bible, to be extremist. Additionally, the expert study bases its conclusion on theological grounds. Its authors object to the New World Translation’s rendering of the Tetragrammaton as Jehovah, and falsely claim that the text was altered to fit the Witnesses’ doctrine.

The Vyborg City Court’s decision is not yet in force, and the New World Translation has not been added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials. The Witnesses will appeal the decision to the Leningrad Regional Court within 30 days.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

PHYSICAL ASSAULTS

Between September 2016 and August 2017, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 12 cases of physical assault, including a threat of murder.

VANDALISM AND ARSON

Between September 2016 and August 2017, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 16 attacks on Kingdom Halls, including the arson of one of them. In another case, a Witness family and their elderly parents suffered the arson of their family home but escaped without loss of life.

- **30 April 2017**, Moscow Region, village of Lutsino. A male neighbor set fire to a house owned by one of Jehovah’s Witnesses.
- **24 May 2017**, Republic of Komi, village of Zheshart. Unidentified persons set fire to a residential building in which Jehovah’s Witnesses hold religious meetings.

NEGATIVE MEDIA

Between January and April 2017, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 27 negative video attacks on television. Nearly every week Russian media publicises slanderous reports about Jehovah’s Witnesses, which negatively influence public opinion.

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Applications pending with the ECHR

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Complaints pending with the CCPR

	APPLICATIONS	COMPLAINTS
Liquidation of National Religious Organisation	1	—
Liquidation of Local Religious Organisation, Registration	2	5
Censorship of Religious Literature and Website	7	2
Revocation of Permit to Import Religious Literature	1	—
Detention or Criminal conviction for practicing religion	2	—
Prosecution/Detention for Evangelizing	3	—
Seizure of Religious Literature in Transport	1	—
Home search, Literature Seized	4	—
Raid on or Interference with Religious Meeting	10	—
TOTAL	31	7

In Russia, there are more than 175,000 active Jehovah’s Witnesses, and over 290,000 attend their religious meetings



Arson attack in Lutsino



OMON raid of religious service in Oryol

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RESPECTFULLY REQUEST THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION TO:

- Respect the fundamental freedoms of Jehovah's Witnesses
- Reverse the Supreme Court decision of 17 July 2017 that implements the repression of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia
- Abide by the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the international law to which Russia has obligated itself, including the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights
- Release Dennis Christensen and stop persecuting Jehovah's Witnesses for the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs
- Remove the religious literature of Jehovah's Witnesses from the Federal List of Extremist Materials
- Void the 17 August 2017 ruling of the Vyborg City Court, which declared that the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures is not a Bible and is "extremist material"

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in 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 here to learn more about legal developments and human rights affecting Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.