

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS

STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN  
ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S  
CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

OFFICE OF GENERAL COUNSEL  
WORLD HEADQUARTERS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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# Certain Territories in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions of Ukraine

- ✎ **Jehovah's Witnesses** suffer persecution and restrictions in certain territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Eastern Ukraine.
- ✎ **Armed groups have seized** a number of Kingdom Halls of Jehovah's Witnesses (houses of worship). At present, the Witnesses have lost seven buildings in the Donetsk region (City of Donetsk, Telmanove, Yenakiyev, Kirovske, and three in Horlivka), and five in the Luhansk region (City of Luhansk, Alchevsk, Brianka, Perevalsk, and Krasnyi Luch). Additionally, Kingdom Halls in Sverdlovsk (Dovzhansk) and Donetsk (53a Ostrovskoho) were vandalized and desecrated.
- ✎ **Since no legal remedies** exist in these territories, Jehovah's Witnesses have no way to protect their violated rights.

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## Abuses and Restrictions of Religious Freedom

### RAIDS

**During March–July 2017**, the communities of Jehovah's Witnesses experienced extensive raids by the law enforcement authorities of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). The inspections were justified as necessary for combating extremism.

- 1. 18 March 2017, town of Kirovske.** The police officers, referring to an order from the General Prosecutor's Office to inspect the activity of all communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, conducted an inspection of the local Kingdom Hall and took copies of the title documents. The next day, two officers of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) of the DPR conducted a search in the Kingdom Hall in Donetsk at 11 Robespiera Street. The purpose of the search was to find and to confiscate the religious literature of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- 2. 21 May 2017, Dokuchaievsk.** Chief of police Oleksiy Oleksandrovych Kovtun, accompanied by three armed persons (including Dmytro Oleksandrovych Oleksienko and Natalia Leonidivna Mishchenko) disrupted

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the religious service of Jehovah's Witnesses that was being conducted in the local Kingdom Hall. They searched the premises, trying to find religious literature. Then they questioned those in attendance and took copies of the title documents. Under the threat of arrest, the worshippers were prohibited from conducting their religious services.

3. **1 and 7 June 2017, Snizhne.** Armed police officers forced their way into the local Kingdom Hall. They inspected the premises and questioned those in attendance. One of such interventions was directed by Yevhen Oleksandrovykh Magda, deputy chief of the police department. The Witnesses were warned that since their activity was not registered in DPR, it was unlawful and that they would be persecuted.
4. **20 June 2017, Donetsk and Yasynuvata.** Local police and the prosecutor's office, referring to the Law of DPR On Combating Extremism, requested that local communities of Jehovah's Witnesses provide copies of all registration documents. The officers interrogated the ministers of those communities. The Witnesses were warned that because they did not have local registration documents, their activity was unlawful.
5. **24 June 2017, Torez.** Two ministers of the local religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses were summoned for interrogation by the deputy chief of the police department. After the interrogation they were ordered to stop any religious activity until their local registration is received.
6. **29 June 2017, Khartsyzsk.** Town prosecutor, Oleksandr Viktorovych Cherkashyn, summoned and interrogated two ministers of the local religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses. Referring to the fact that the community did not have registration in the DPR, Jehovah's Witnesses were prohibited from conducting their preaching activity in the town under the threat of arrest.

7. **4 August 2017, Alchevsk and Luhansk.** Special anti-terror units, together with soldiers and police, interrupted the religious services of Jehovah's Witnesses in Alchevsk and Luhansk, claiming there had been a bomb threat. After evacuating the worshippers from the buildings, the officers checked their documents and, after having them stand in the burning sun for two hours, eventually released them.



**Alchevsk**  
**Raid of religious services**  
**in Alchevsk**

The officers in Alchevsk inspected the building and "found" material that they themselves had smuggled in and planted. In contrast to the high-quality, full-colour literature of the Witnesses, the officers in Alchevsk put before their cameras some poor-quality, black-and-white anti-LPR propaganda pamphlets. They pulled the material from a box in which the Witnesses had received religious literature from the organisation's printery in Germany, implying that it was from the same source.

**On 28 August 2017,** Deputy Minister of the State Security in the Luhansk territory, Oleksandr Basov, used the fabrications of the **4 August** raids as justification for an official statement about barring the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses.

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Deputy Minister Basov alleged that the activity of a non-registered religious organisation such as Jehovah's Witnesses assists the government of Ukraine and political and paramilitary groups aligned against the Luhansk authorities. (What Mr. Basov did not say is that no religious organisation has been registered in the Luhansk territories because no provision for registering a religion has been established.) He referred to the propaganda materials planted and "found" in the Alchevsk Kingdom Hall as proof of his allegation that the Witnesses support groups that are considered terrorists in the Luhansk territory, and stated that Jehovah's Witnesses are on Russia's list of extremist organisations.

## HARASSMENT

In the Donetsk region, representatives of the law enforcement agencies of the Donetsk People's Republic persist in their efforts to apply the regulations of the Russian anti-extremist legislation<sup>1</sup> against local Jehovah's Witnesses. These regulations are reflected in the document<sup>2</sup> adopted by the Parliament of the DPR.

**1. 1 February 2017, Olenivka, Volnovakha District.** At the DPR checkpoint, Ms. Svitlana M. was briefly detained because she had a few copies of the Witnesses' religious literature.

**On 8 February 2017**, she was summoned for interrogation before two MSS officers of the DPR, Maksym Oleksandrovych and Vadym Vasyliovych Pochtaruk. Both stated that the import of the religious publications of Jehovah's Witnesses is prohibited and that the Witnesses' activity is unwelcome.

**On 17 February 2017**, MSS DPR officers Maksym Oleksandrovych and V. V. Pochtaruk interrogated Andriy M., the husband of Ms. Svitlana M., and Oleksandr S. They emphasized that members of the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses might be charged with incitement of religious enmity.

**2. 18 March 2017, town of Khrestivka (Kirovske).** DPR police officers referred to the corresponding order of the General Prosecutor's Office of the DPR<sup>3</sup> and arranged the inspection of the local religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses with respect to extremist activity. Copies of the community statutory documents were confiscated.

**3. 19 March 2017, city of Donetsk.** Two officers of the MSS DPR, including Maksym Oleksandrovych, inspected the religious building of Jehovah's Witnesses at 11 Robespiera Street in search of "extremist literature."

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<sup>1</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/18939>

<sup>2</sup> [http://old.dnr-online.ru/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Zakon\\_DNR\\_O\\_protivodeystvii\\_ekstremistskoy\\_deyatelnosti\\_ot\\_24062015.pdf](http://old.dnr-online.ru/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Zakon_DNR_O_protivodeystvii_ekstremistskoy_deyatelnosti_ot_24062015.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> According to the official Internet site of the DPR government, on December 23, 2016, DPR Prosecutor General Andriy Spivak in his address stated that during the next year his Office "will give special attention to combating extremism." (<http://dnrsovet.su/i-o-generalnogo-prokurora-dnr-podvel-itogi-raboty-za-2016-god/>).

**4. In August 2017**, a number of Jehovah's Witnesses reported that authorities have stopped them from sharing their beliefs with others and warned them not to continue, though none have yet been charged by the police. Many of the Witnesses in the region also report that the MSS has called them in to meet with officers. During the meetings, the Witnesses were interrogated, intimidated, and put under pressure to reveal names of those organizing their religious activity, how literature is delivered, how they carry out our work, and how it is financed.

#### CENSORSHIP

**In July 2017**, the Supreme Court of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), put two articles from past issues of the Witnesses' religious magazines on the Republican Extremist Material List and banned their distribution. The Witnesses were not notified of the proceedings, have not been able to obtain the decision, and cannot appeal the immediately enforceable decision.

**In August 2017**, prosecutor's offices in Novoazovsk and Debaltsevo issued warning letters to the local Witnesses, directing them not to distribute the Awake! and The Watchtower magazines without first obtaining a permit. In this way the authorities obstruct distribution even of religious materials not declared extremist and threaten to hold congregation elders liable for any of the Witnesses' literature that is distributed.

## Societal Abuses and Discrimination

#### VANDALISM

Sverdlovsk (Dovzhansk), Luhansk Region. **On 19 April 2017**, two officers of the Ministry of State Security of the Luhansk People's Republic threatened local ministers of Jehovah's Witnesses with negative consequences if they refused to cooperate with them.

➤ **On 30 April 2017**, the Kingdom Hall at 57 Hryboiedova Street was robbed and desecrated. In particular, the intruder relieved himself on the stage of the main hall of this religious building. The material damage is estimated at about two thousand euros.

➤ **The lead detective** of the town police department, R.V. Zemlianukhin, refused to conduct an investigation because the religious community does not have local registration.

Donetsk. **On 3 September 2017**, the local Witnesses found that the Kingdom Hall at 53a Ostrovskoho Street in the city of Donetsk had been vandalized and desecrated.



#### Sverdlovsk (Dovzhansk), Luhansk Region

**On 30 April 2017, the Kingdom Hall at 57 Hryboiedova Street was robbed and desecrated.**



# JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RESPECTFULLY REQUEST THE AUTHORITIES IN THE DONETSK AND LUHANSK REGIONS OF UKRAINE TO:

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

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



Scan here to learn about legal developments and human rights affecting Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine.