



freedom and the right to freedom of association guaranteed by human rights treaties. The OSCE has noted that denial of access to legal entity status represents an unacceptable and impermissible violation of the right to freedom of religion.<sup>1</sup> In many instances, Russia has used the registration law as a weapon to ban and restrict religious communities while imposing criminal sanctions for non-registered religious activity.

## **Extremism Law**

The gravest threat to religious freedom in Russia is the government's escalating use of the Federal Act of 25 July 2002 (with subsequent amendments), "On Counteracting Extremist Activity" ("Extremism Law" or "Law") to censor religious scriptures and harass and disrupt religious organizations under the pretext of combating "religious extremism."

The Extremism Law may have been justified by the need to combat terrorism after the infamous terrorist attacks in 2001. However, the Russian government has relied increasingly upon this law to improperly target and suppress religious minorities. This has led to a wide-ranging crackdown on religious literature, minority religious organizations and their members in Russia.

The Extremism Law is typically used against religions to censor religious literature based on biased expert reports. For example, Forum 18 notes that, in one case, Muslim literature was banned because the expert argued the literature was "extremist" as it "propagandizes the idea of the superiority of Islam - and therefore Muslims - over other religions and the people who adhere to them".<sup>2</sup> Yet, a fundamental tenet of religious freedom is the right to say that yours is the only true religion. NGOs and the Russian Human Rights Ombudsman have expressed concern over the use of the Extremism Law to suppress and censor religions.

The campaign has been chillingly wide-ranging. Russia's Supreme Court has declared Jehovah's Witnesses, a Christian denomination that rejects violence, as "extremist," confirming an order by the Justice Ministry that the group be "liquidated" and thereby banning them from operating on Russian territory. Further, Muslims, Evangelicals, Lutherans, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Presbyterians, Hindus, Buddhists, Scientologists and others have been targeted.

The Law provides for harsh penalties against organizations, allowing the possibility of suspension or banning of their activity, liquidation of the organization conducting or suspected of conducting extremist activity, forfeiture of property and prosecution of individuals associated with the organization for distributing banned materials or for continuing the activities of the organization subsequent to liquidation.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., *Freedom of Religion or Belief: Laws Affecting the Structuring of Religious Communities*, OSCE Review Conference, September 1999.

<sup>2</sup> "Russia: How the Battle with Extremism was Begun" Geraldine Fagan, 27 April 2009  
<http://www.forum18.org>.

The Russian Supreme Court's July 2017 decision against the Jehovah's Witnesses highlights the disturbing trend of persecution of religious minorities in Russia. Subsequent to that decision, Dennis Christensen, a Danish Jehovah's Witness, was arrested and imprisoned under Extremism charges for practicing his faith in Russia. Likewise, the Church of Scientology Moscow Church has been ordered liquidated and five religious leaders of the Scientology religious group in St. Petersburg have been held in pretrial detention for the last three months based in part on similar extremism charges.

The misuse of the Extremism Law against minority faiths in Russia has been condemned as a human rights violation by the UN Human Rights Committee, the Council of Europe and the Venice Commission. Numerous cases challenging the use of the Law against religions are pending before the European Human Rights Court.

### **Conclusion**

We urge the Russian authorities to lift the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses' activities in Russia, to reverse the closing of the Jehovah's Witnesses Administrative Center, to refrain from liquidating the Moscow Scientology Church and to release Dennis Christensen, the five Scientologists and any other members of religious minorities that continue to be unjustly detained for so-called "extremist" activities.

We further urge Russia to respect the right of all to exercise the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. All religious minorities should be able to enjoy freedom of religion and assembly without interference, as guaranteed by the Russian Federation's Constitution.

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