

SPECIAL REPORT

RUSSIA'S ATTACK ON JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

STATE-SPONSORED PERSECUTION
OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN RUSSIA
THREATENS FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

OFFICE OF GENERAL COUNSEL
WORLD HEADQUARTERS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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TIMELINE

RUSSIA'S ATTACK ON JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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

1992

11 December: Russian Federation legally registers Jehovah's Witnesses

2004

26 March: Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses banned

1996

March: Jehovah's Witnesses fully exonerated as victims of political repression

2006

27 July: Federal Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity is modified to remove from the definition of extremism the requirement of appeals to violent acts

2009

11 September: Rostov Regional Court declares 34 publications of Jehovah's Witnesses to be extremist

2009

8 December: Supreme Court of the Russian Federation upholds decision to declare 34 publications of Jehovah's Witnesses to be extremist

2010

10 June: European Court of Human Rights declares the ban on the Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses a violation of human rights

2014

2 December: Supreme Court of the Russian Federation bans jw.org, official website of Jehovah's Witnesses

2015

30 November: Sixteen Witnesses on retrial in Taganrog are criminally convicted for practicing their faith. The judge suspends the sentences

2016

2 March: Prosecutor General's Office issues warning letter threatening to liquidate the Witnesses' national headquarters for alleged "extremist activity"

STEPS OF SYSTEMATIC
ATTACK ON JEHOVAH'S
WITNESSES

1

CRIMINALIZE
RELIGIOUS
LITERATURE



2

CRIMINALIZE
LOCAL RELIGIOUS
ORGANIZATIONS



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 causes irreparable damage to 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 will hear the Witnesses' appeal on 17 July. If the chamber affirms the 20 April decision, the State-sponsored persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses is sure to intensify.

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

2017

17 January: Russian appellate court dismisses Witnesses' appeal against the warning, making it enforceable

2017

20 April: Supreme Court of the Russian Federation rules to criminalize the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia: [1] to liquidate their Administrative Center and 395 Local Religious Organizations, [2] to confiscate their property, and [3] to terminate all their activity

2017

17 July: A three-judge panel of the Appellate Chamber of the Supreme Court hears the appeal of Jehovah's Witnesses against the 20 April 2017 decision of the Supreme Court

2017

15 March: Ministry of Justice issues a directive to suspend immediately the activity of the Administrative Center and all 395 Local Religious Organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses. The directive effectively bans the religious activity of Jehovah's Witnesses until the Supreme Court's decision

2017

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

2017

18 July:



3

CRIMINALIZE THE ADMINISTRATIVE CENTER



4

CRIMINALIZE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES



The Federal Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity

(Law on Extremism) is used as the basis for charges of extremism against Jehovah's Witnesses. As amended in 2006, the law does not require calls to violent acts but only the vague concept of "incitement of . . . religious discord"

1 CRIMINALIZE RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

Russian authorities began misapplying the Law on Extremism to Jehovah's Witnesses by commissioning bogus expert studies to target their religious literature



In 2008, the Rostov Regional Prosecutor's Office commissioned an "expert study" of the Witnesses' religious literature. The study concluded, in part, that the literature has "the potential to undermine respect" for other religions.

Based on the "expert study," the Rostov Regional Court concluded that the literature was "aimed at inciting religious discord." On 11 September 2009, the court ruled to declare 34 Witness publications "extremist," and these were eventually placed on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. The Russian Federation Supreme Court upheld the decision on appeal.

In a separate case, on 27 January 2010, the Supreme Court of the Altay Republic upheld a lower court

decision that declared an additional 18 religious publications "extremist."

These two decisions formed the basis for all other extremism charges against Jehovah's Witnesses.

By the start of 2016, similar court actions had declared a total of 88 religious publications "extremist." These publications include . . .

- *My Book of Bible Stories*, a children's book
- *The Watchtower*—a magazine that has been in print for over 100 years, with a worldwide distribution of over 61,000,000 copies per issue, and that is available in 303 languages

DR. EKATERINA ELBAKYAN

Professor of Sociology and Management of Social Processes at the Moscow Academy of Labor and Social Relations

“ It is true that in Russia today religious expert studies are often performed by people who are not specialists, and are made-to-order, so to speak, where an expert is not free to state his true findings. ”

2

CRIMINALIZE LOCAL RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Russian courts use the Law on Extremism to declare “extremist” the legal entities (Local Religious Organizations, or LROs) that support congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses



Jehovah’s Witnesses meet in congregations for worship and often use their religious literature when talking to others about their faith. Since a congregation is registered under an LRO, prosecutors and courts have linked the LRO to the literature that was already declared “extremist.”

Courts therefore conclude that an LRO engages in “extremist activity” and then liquidate it, ban its

activity, and confiscate its property. In each case, the Supreme Court has confirmed the LRO liquidations.

Prior to the 20 April Supreme Court decision, eight LROs were declared “extremist.” Since the decision, all remaining 395 LROs and the Administrative Center (national office) have now been declared “extremist organizations.”

3

CRIMINALIZE THE ADMINISTRATIVE CENTER

After Russian courts had declared a number of religious publications and LROs “extremist,” authorities began their attack on the Administrative Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia



- 2 March 2016: The Prosecutor General issues a warning, threatening to liquidate the Administrative Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia for alleged “extremist activity”
- 1 February 2017: The Ministry of Justice orders an inspection of the Administrative Center
- 27 February 2017: The Ministry of Justice concluded, based on the inspection report, that the Administrative Center violated the law and that it showed signs of engaging in “extremist activity”

- 15 March 2017: The Ministry of Justice files the liquidation claim in the Supreme Court “to declare the religious organization, the Administrative Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses, extremist, ban its activity, and liquidate it”
- 20 April 2017: The Supreme Court of the Russian Federation rules in favor of the Ministry of Justice

The Appellate Chamber of the Supreme Court is scheduled to hear the Witnesses’ appeal on 17 July 2017

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CRIMINALIZE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

When Russian courts succeeded in declaring the Witnesses' literature and their LROs "extremist," law-enforcement authorities began targeting individual Witnesses merely for practicing their faith



The 20 April 2017 decision of the Supreme Court grants the claim of the Ministry of Justice to:

liquidate the Administrative Center and the LROs of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, **confiscate** the property of those legal entities, and **terminate** the entities' activity.

Because of the Supreme Court decision, Witnesses are labeled as "extremists."

- Some Russian authorities are interpreting the decision as a license to deprive the Witnesses of their religious freedom, alleging that by gathering for worship, the Witnesses are continuing the activity of an illegal "extremist organization"
- As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses are subjected to State-sponsored persecution and societal abuses

Government abuses, harassment, and restrictions

Russian authorities raid the religious services of Jehovah's Witnesses and threaten prosecution on the basis of Article 282 of the Criminal Code,

punishing "extremism." A conviction brings a prison term of six to ten years.

CRIMINAL PROSECUTION: On 25 May, an FSB officer directed a group of about 15 OMON (Special Purpose Police Unit) officers in a raid of the Witnesses' religious services in Oryol. They disrupted the services, recorded the passport information of all present, and arrested Dennis Christensen, a Danish citizen and an elder of the Oryol Congregation. Mr. Christensen is being held in pretrial detention until 23 July while the prosecutor attempts to build a case against him for "extremist activity"

POLICE RAIDS: From 15 March through the end of May 2017, the Witnesses documented 18 police raids of their peaceful religious services

THREATS AND HARASSMENT: The FSB is investigating Jehovah's Witnesses across Russia, checking up on them at home, at work, at school, and among their associates, family, and neighbors:

- In June 2017, two FSB officers went to the workplace of a Witness and "wanted to get acquainted." They questioned him extensively, recorded his passport information, and told him that there will be similar inspections of Jehovah's Witnesses across Russia

DENIAL OF RIGHTS: Some government commissions are beginning to refuse the constitutional right to alternative civilian service for Jehovah's Witnesses who are conscientious objectors:

- On 9 June, one of Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea was instructed that his request for alternative civilian service would be granted only if he first certified that he had changed his religion



Dennis Christensen (right) at the time of his arrest

Societal abuses and discrimination

When the mass media reports on court decisions and other government actions against the Witnesses, the presumption is that the Witnesses' faith promotes criminal activity and that the Witnesses are "criminals," resulting in . . .

ATTACKS AND BEATINGS BY AGGRESSIVE INDIVIDUALS

→ On 26 April 2017, a neighbor ran up to one of Jehovah's Witnesses as he left his home in Belgorod and shouted, "You were banned!" He then struck the Witness repeatedly with blows to the face, head, and body

HOMES AND HOUSES OF WORSHIP HAVE BEEN ATTACKED WITH ACTS OF VANDALISM AND ARSON

- Arson attack by a neighbor on the home of a Witness family in Lutsino, Moscow Region, on 30 April 2017
- On 24 May 2017, in Zheshart, Komi Republic, arsonists caused significant damage to a building used by Jehovah's Witnesses for religious services
- At least nine other houses of worship have been vandalized

HARASSMENT, DISCRIMINATION, AND ABUSES AT THE WORKPLACE, AT SCHOOL, AND FROM NEIGHBORS

- On 24 April 2017, two sixth-grade Witness girls in music class were assigned to sing the song "Holy War" but conscientiously refused. When the girls' mother spoke to the teacher, she said: "You are now extremists and will not be indulged." Then, in front of the entire class, the teacher said: "You are now banned, and we have had enough of your religion."
- Police officers, investigators, and FSB agents have gone to the homes of many Witnesses to question and intimidate them or have summoned Witnesses to their offices. They inquire about the person's beliefs and activities and about who leads the congregation, and they often threaten the Witness
- Many have already been dismissed from their employment because they are Witnesses
- A number of Witnesses have been placed on a public list of accomplices to terrorism because the government has charged them with "extremism" for their peaceful religious activity



OMON raid of religious service in Oryol



Arson attack in Lutsino

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

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RESPECTFULLY REQUEST THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION TO:

- Respect the fundamental freedoms of Jehovah's Witnesses
- Reverse the Supreme Court decision of 20 April 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 prosecuting Jehovah's Witnesses for the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue with the Presidential Administration of the Russian government.

“ From the moment today's judgment was pronounced, the entire way of life of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, as individuals and families, fundamentally changed. They are now under threat of criminal prosecution and imprisonment merely for practicing their faith ”

VASILY KALIN

Speaking on behalf of Jehovah's Witnesses after the adverse Supreme Court decision of 20 April 2017



Scan the QR code to learn more about legal developments and human rights affecting Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.