

RUSSIA: 22 Jehovah's Witnesses behind bars/ First female JW locked up

JW Headquarters / Russia Religion News (10.07.2018) – <https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/180706a.html> – On 6 July 2018, 46-year-old Sergei Poliakov and his wife, Anastasia, who are suspected of professing the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, were sent to an Omsk SIZO (pretrial detention). They were arrested during searches conducted on 4 July 2018 in the homes of local residents.

The Poliakov couple were incommunicado for two days and the door to their apartment was found to be broken down. Simultaneous searches were conducted in at least four residences of Omsk. Beginning at 7:00 a.m., searches continued until 15:00 and were conducted in houses, parcels of land, business structures, and in citizens' parked cars. All sorts of electronic devices and data storage were seized. During a search, witnesses actively helped law enforcement personnel, prompted, and even tried to question believers. The operation was conducted by Denis Loginovsky, an investigator of the Azov Investigation Department of the Russian Investigative Committee for Omsk oblast.

It is still not known which articles the criminal case will be based on. However law enforcement agencies in various regions of Russia mistakenly take the shared religious confession of citizens as participation in an extremist organization. The attention of prominent public figures of Russia and also of the Council for Human Rights under the Russian president has already been called to this problem. (tr. by PDS, posted 9 July 2018)

IRAN : Over 130 religious Leaders condemn Iran regime

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Rowan Williams, has led over 50 British bishops and nearly 80 US church leaders to condemn the Iranian Regime for its human rights abuses and mistreatment of religious minorities in a statement released today.

Mohabat News (27.06.2018) – <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=4027> – The statement called on the international community to pay more attention to the plight of the Iranian people, particularly religious minorities, who have long suffered at the hands of the dictatorship.

The Rt Rev. John Pritchard, former Bishop of Oxford and one of the signatories of the statement, said: “Today, we announce the initiative by Dr. Rowan Williams and supported by more than 50 bishops in the UK along with 78 US church leaders, which highlights the plight of the Iranian people and the religious minorities in Iran, particularly the Christians, calling on the international community to act to defend their rights in the face of government harassment and persecution.” The Iranian Regime has been condemned a massive 64 times for its human rights record by the United Nations and many more times by various international human rights organizations. While the majority of those targeted by the Regime are Shiite Muslims, who make up the majority of Iran’s population, religious minorities are targets specifically for their faith. Worse still, the situation is not getting better.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the United Nations Human Rights Council in February: “No improvement was observed

concerning the situation of religious and ethnic minorities, who remain subject to restrictions. [I] remain concerned by reports of persistent human rights violations of and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities.”

While, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom’s 2018 report revealed that religious freedom in Iran has continued to deteriorate, with many Christian converts and house church leaders given least 10 years in prison, and many religious reformers facing “prolonged detention and possible execution”.

This abuse of human rights is justified by the Regime under their warped version of Islam, but is not recognised by any true believer.

Indeed, Maryam Rajavi, who leads the Iranian opposition and will be the keynote speaker at their June 30 gathering in Paris, states that Islam does not approve of any form of compulsion, coercion and forcible prohibition, including the use of flogging and terror, imposing the compulsory veil, and especially imposing the rule of a government under the name of God and Islam.

The statement reported that the nationwide anti-regime uprising in Iran showed that the Iranian people want democracy in their country and the religious leaders agreed that the West should support that.

The statement read: ““We call on all countries to take into consideration the deplorable situation of human rights in Iran, particularly the painful situation of religious minorities, in navigating their relations with Iran. We urge them to base any improvement of relations with Iran on a cessation of oppression of minorities and on a halt to executions in Iran. The time has come for us to listen to the Iranian people’s demand for freedom, including religious freedom.”

This statement is the latest in a series of public condemnations of the Iranian Regime for its human rights abuses and of support for the Iranian opposition and their Free Iran rally.

Countering extremism in Indonesia and beyond

Religious Freedom Institute (<https://bit.ly/2KP2a10>) – Between May 8 and May 14, 2018 Indonesia was hit by a wave of ISIS terrorist attacks, including bombings carried out by families—fathers, mothers, and children together. The principal targets were churches and police stations, including the headquarters of the paramilitary Police Mobile Brigade (which is also where Ahok, the former Governor of Jakarta and a Christian, is serving a sentence for blasphemy). In the wave of attacks, thirteen terrorists and fourteen others were killed, and more than 40 were injured.

The Indonesian government's security forces responded strongly. There were some early arrests and then, on May 31, in a series of raids, anti-terrorist squads arrested 41 terror suspects and killed 4 others. These raids came less than a week after the May 25 passage of a new anti-terrorism law that criminalized overseas terror attacks and allowed for longer detention of suspects. The bill had been languishing in parliament for two years amid controversies over how strict it should be and how to define terrorism, but this the wave of deadly suicide attacks persuaded lawmakers the bill should be passed.

But a much more low-key event may signal broader changes in

how Indonesia is approaching its effort to combat extremism.

On May 31, Indonesian President Joko Widodo appointed Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf (Pak Yahya) as a member of the Presidential Advisory Council. Pak Yahya is from one of Indonesia's most distinguished Muslim families, is the Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Muslim organization, and is the head of Gerkan Pemuda Ansor (ANSOR), NU's young-adult wing, which has some 5 million members. He is also among the Muslim world's most incisive and outspoken reformers.

NU has long been engaged in ideological combat with Islamist extremism. In May 2017, Ansor called together more than 300 international religious scholars to consider the "obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law" that call for "perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam." This gathering issued the Ansor "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam," that built on the May 16, 2016, NU-hosted International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL).

The "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam," is far more self-critical than declarations that have come from the Middle East. It argues that there are elements within classical Islam that are problematic and need to be changed. At the press conference announcing the Declaration, Ansor Chairman Yaqut Qoumas stated "It is false and counterproductive to claim that the actions of al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram and other such groups have nothing to do with Islam, or merely represent a perversion of Islamic teachings. They are, in fact, outgrowths of Wahhabism and other fundamentalist streams of Sunni Islam."

Pak Yahya reemphasized these themes and expressed them in an even more radical fashion in a July 18, 2017, address to the Council of the European Union Terrorism Working Party, many of whose members would have accused the speaker of Islamophobia if he had been anyone else. He stressed:

“Western politicians should stop pretending that extremism and terrorism have nothing to do with Islam. There is a clear relationship between fundamentalism, terrorism, and the basic assumptions of Islamic orthodoxy. So long as we lack consensus regarding this matter, we cannot gain victory over fundamentalist violence within Islam.”

“Within the classical tradition, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is assumed to be one of segregation and enmity.”

“Why, no matter how many [terrorists] we kill or put in jail, new recruits are always coming to join them? Here is the fact: the problem lies within Islam itself. Jihadist doctrine, goals and strategy can be readily traced to specific elements of orthodox, authoritative Islam and its historic practice, including those portions of fiqh-classical Islamic law or shari‘ah-that enjoin Islamic supremacy.”

While NU as a whole has not endorsed the “Declaration on Humanitarian Islam,” Pak Yahya told me they are discussing it and he has suffered little criticism for his statements. The arguments that he and Ansor are making are radical, and crucial in the battle with extremism. And they are gaining increasing attention in Indonesia and around the world.

On May 17, 2018, Pak Yahya met with Vice President Pence for the second time. And the fact that Indonesian President Jokowi has now appointed him to his Advisory Council sends a strong signal about Jokowi’s own attitudes.

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RUSSIA: African Pentecostal student sentenced for illegal evangelism

Russia Religion News (18.05.2018) – <https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/180517c.html> – On 16 May 2018, Nosisa Shiba, a student of the final year of the Nizhny Novgorod Medical Academy, a citizen of Swaziland (Africa), was summoned to the Department for Issues of Migration of the Sormovsk district, where law enforcement personnel charged her on the basis of article 18.8 of part 4 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law of the RF, with a sentence of immediate deportation through a special detention center. The girl, who has been a protestant since childhood, began going to an evangelical church of Nizhny Novgorod, the Embassy of Jesus Bible Center of KhVE, upon her arrival in Russia. According to the press service of the church, she sang a song about God and his love for people in her church one time. The video of Nosisa's performance was found on YouTube by the Federal Security Service (F.S.B.) of the RF. The deputy of the ruling bishop of the ROSKhVE in the Volga federal district, the pastor of the Embassy of Jesus Bible Center of KhVE (city of Nizhny Novgorod), Bishop Pavel Ryndich, commented on the situation in his accounts on social networks.

“Today there was a trial again. This time it was of Nosisa, an African who sang in our praise service while being a student of the medical academy. Our sister was convicted because she sang praises. This was considered to be missionary activity without the documents permitting it. And we were unable to prove to the judge that in evangelical churches, everybody may

sing. Once again, somebody with a bias dug up somewhere in the vastness of the internet one of my year-old sermons, where he made out the African woman among the worshipers. He identified her. He wrote up a bunch of materials. And with such enthusiasm and ardor that you are amazed. Lo and behold, such good deeds!”

The court issued a relatively positive decision, with a fine of 7,000 rubles and deportation from the country after the completion of her studies. As the clergyman notes, although the student got off with a slight fright, the trend is unpleasant: at first, a trial on level ground, then joy that she will just be deported and not jailed. Then maybe it will be “be happy that you are just jailed and not shot.” The bishop emphasized especially the moment in the trial when the judge asked whether Nosisa had any medical counter-indicators for staying in a special detention center until her deportation—she just about fainted.

Christians throughout Russia demonstrated prayer support for the girl and, the pastor said, there are positive results. Secular news media published actively and described this ambiguous situation. “Today I talked by phone with a Russian scholar of eastern studies, a host on the ‘Vesti FM’ radio station, Evgeny Satanovsky. It is nice that there still are many literate people in the news media,” Bishop Pavel Ryndich shared. (tr. by PDS, posted 17 May 2018)

Press Service of ROSKhVE, 17 May 2018

RUSSIA: A sixth Jehovah's

Witness accused of extremism behind bars

Operation "Judgment Day" –

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers –

HRWF (20.05.2018) – On 18 May, one day after the widespread police crackdown against Jehovah's Witnesses called "Judgment Day" in Birobidzhan (Jewish autonomous oblast), the hearing of Alam Aliev took place and the court ruled that he should be kept in pretrial detention through 14 July 2018 and scheduled his criminal case to begin on 22 May.

Jehovah's Witness in Birobidzhan target of criminal case

TASS/ Russia Religion News (18.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2KHysvh> – According to materials of the criminal case, a resident of the city of Birobidzhan, in the period from February 2017 to May 2018, he is accused of conducting deliberate, vigorous actions of an organizational character directed at resumption and continuation of the illegal activity of a forbidden religious organization, which had been found in April 2017 to be extremist and its activity banned on the territory of the Russian Federation.

The illegal actions of the suspect were expressed in convening meetings, organizing religious performances, collecting financial resources in the form of donations for the expenses of a religious organization that has been prohibited by a court, and also conducting mass events aimed at distributing extremist literature and materials of extremist contents.

The prosecutor's office has taken control of the investigation of the criminal case.

Punishment for commission of the aforesaid serious crime is

provided by the Criminal Code of the RF in the form of a fine of from 400,000 to 800,000 rubles or the total of salary or other income of the convict for a period of from two to four years or incarceration for a term of from six to ten years, with deprivation of the right to occupy certain offices or to engage in certain activity for a period of up to ten years and restriction of liberty for a term of from one to two years.

Operation "Judgment Day" against Jehovah's Witnesses

Russia Religion News (18.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Lir3Ue> – At least 9 searches in homes of local residents who are thought to be Jehovah's Witnesses were conducted on 17 May in Birobidzhan (Jewish autonomous oblast), the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses reports. One of the operatives participating in the searches said that a total of 150 law enforcement officers are participating in this operation, which has the code name "Judgment Day."

In the process of searches, photographs, bank cards, money, and all electronic equipment (even old and broken things) were taken from the citizens.

Thus far there is no information about which criminal case the searches were being conducted about and on the basis of which article it was opened. However, a criminal case has been initiated against one of the Witnesses, Alam Aliev. He is in custody and his trial is expected for tomorrow.

In the morning of 16 May, a series of searches in homes of citizens who are thought to be Jehovah's Witnesses was conducted in the cities of Orenburg and Buzuluk (Orenburg oblast). According to preliminary information, three citizens were arrested and pledges not to depart were taken from another three. It is known that citizens have been held as defendants on the basis of part 2 of article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the RF (participation in an extremist organization).

It is expected that a decision about the measure for insuring appearance for those arrested will be made on 17 May.

On 17 July of last year, the decision of the Russian Supreme Court finding all 396 religious organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to be extremist and banning their activity took legal effect. (tr. by PDS, posted 17 May 2018)

GREECE: Report on religious education

By Margarita Markoviti

Exemption from Religious Education

Grassrootsmobilise Research Program (25.04.2018) – The compulsory class of religious education in Greek public schools, which is disproportionately focused on Christian Orthodoxy throughout the 9 years of its instruction, offers the option of exemption to non-Orthodox students. In primary schools religion is taught by the main class teacher, while in high schools it is taught by theologians who have graduated from either of the two Orthodox Faculties of Theology in Athens and Thessaloniki.

Article 25, part 3 of the law on “Registrations, Transfers, Attendance and Issues of Organization of School Life in Secondary Education” of November 2017 stipulates that students who wish to be exempt from the class of religion should – either themselves (in case they are over 18) or their parents – submit a formal declaration to the school authorities. The latter are responsible to then decide whether exemption should be granted, according to the relevant provisions in force. A

similar procedure applies to students in primary education.

Other than setting the ground for this process, the above law makes no reference to the specific rules underpinning exemption. Such “relevant provisions” are determined and adapted by government circulars, issued by the respective Minister of Education, which serve to clarify legislative regulations, aiding the civil servants (including public school authorities) in the realization of their work. Over the last 15 years, these circulars have changed frequently, altering each time the conditions of the right to and the process of exemption. In fact, due to their regular modifications, such circulars are often referred to by the name of the respective Minister in office at the time. The main issue that is adjusted with each circular modification concerns the requirement that the students (or their parents) declare that they are not Christian Orthodox and that they reveal their religious (or other) belief as a precondition to exemption.

In 2002, under the government of the Pan-Hellenic Social Movement (PASOK), the Ministry of Education issued a circular¹ which, following a number of questions that the Education Minister, Petros Efthymiou, had received, specified that students who wish to be exempt from religious education in Greek public (secondary) schools, should submit a formal declaration, stating that they are not Christian Orthodox, without, however, declaring the religion to which they belong.

After a number of complaints by parents, the Hellenic Data Protection Authority (HDDPA) – an independent body, whose decisions are binding – intervened over the issue of exemption. In the same year, the HDDPA issued a decision (2), urging the Minister of Education to adjust the exemption process so that the parents who ask for exemption on behalf of their children are not obliged to also reveal their religious or other convictions. For, according to the HDDPA, such an obligation of having to reveal what religion one does not

belong to (a negative declaration, in other words) constitutes a breach of the protection of one's sensitive personal data. No changes were, however, made to the "Efthymiou circular" after the HDPA's intervention.

In July 2008, this time during the New Democracy administration, Education Minister Evripidis Stylianidis issued a circular (3) and a subsequent statement of clarification according to which "justification for refusal (to attend the class of religion) is not necessary in the exemption declaration form". Though praised by the Greek Ombudsman, who even noticed the compatibility of the new circular with European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) jurisprudence (4) , the "Stylianidis circular" led to fierce reactions by certain Orthodox Metropolitan Bishops of the Holy Synod and by members of the Pan-Hellenic Union of Theologians, which was at the time the only trade union representing theologians who taught religion in Greek schools.

Thus, only a few weeks after the clarification statement, on August 24, 2008, Stylianidis issued a new circular that focused, this time, on the issue of the activities of students who are exempt from religious education, specifying that: "non-Orthodox students (meaning heterodox and those of other faiths), who are exempt from the class of Religion for reasons of conscience should, during the school hour of the specific subject, attend a different class of the same grade"(5). As the letter of the Greek Ombudsman to the Special Secretary on Matters of Education and Innovation noticed (6), this ambiguous statement seemed to refute the provisions of the previous circular, since it created confusion over who is entitled to ask for exemption in the first place.

Five years later, in 2013, a new circular (7) by New Democracy Minister of Education, Konstantinos Arvanitopoulos, stipulated that "exemption from the class of Religion is granted following submission of the Declaration Form [...] in which the student should either mention that he/she is not Christian

Orthodox or invoke reasons of religious conscience, without the obligatory mention of the religion to which he/she belongs". Students (or their parents) were moreover required to submit the form within 5 days from the beginning of the school year.

The 'Arvanitopoulos circular' remained in force until January 23, 2015 when, only two days before the January 2015 national elections, PASOK Education Minister, Andreas Loverdos, issued a new set of clarifications. After pressure by the Pan-Hellenic Union of Theologians (8), Loverdos altered, once again, the conditions for exemption. The 'Loverdos circular' (9) established that: "[...] non-Orthodox students, meaning heterodox or those of other faiths, are given the possibility of exemption, invoking reasons of religious conscience [...]". It specified moreover that As on some occasions [...] an exploitation of the right to exemption related to freedom of religious conscience has been observed, school directors are asked to inspect the validity of the reasons presented, stressing the gravity of the Formal Declaration to all those interested [...]. Exemption from the class of RE is granted only following submission of the Formal Declaration by the student (if he or she is an adult) or by both his parents (if he or she is a minor), which should state that the student is not Christian Orthodox and has, thus, the right to claim reasons of religious conscience, without the obligatory reference to his religion, unless he or she so wishes. The 'Loverdos circular' is still in force, in spite of occasional statements by members of the current SYIRZA administration that seemed to challenge the current rules of the exemption

process. For instance, on September 25, 2015, Sia Anagnostopoulou, former Alternate Minister of Education, announced her intention to simplify the exemption process, adding that parents should be allowed to simply ask that their child does not take the class of religion, with no reference – either positive or negative – to their religion.(10) Following

reactions by Archbishop Ieronymos, and though Anagnostopoulou revoked her initial position, such statements were enough to spark an ongoing debate and intense discussions between the Church and the government.

The New School of Religious Education

Parallel to the story of exemption requirements, it is important to also consider the question of the content and objectives of the religious education course. In 2011, PASOK's Education Minister, Anna Diamantopoulou, initiated the New School project, which entailed a series of reforms of the curriculum of various school subjects, including religion. The New School conceptualizes religious education as a subject that is "open and pluralistic"(11). Targeting, moreover, the denominational character of religious education and taking into consideration the changes in the country's population, the New School seeks to integrate the reality of religious diversity into the school through the study of not only the Christian traditions of Europe, but also of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, with a special focus on Judaism and Islam. Christianity, however, does not lose its central position in this new project, whose objective is, after all, to "build on and to broaden the already existing religious experience and understanding of students"(12). The New School was, lastly, supported by members of a new union of theologians called "Kairos". Created in 2010, the objective of "Kairos" is to promote this new approach to religious education, challenging the conservative outlook of the Pan-Hellenic Union of Theologians, which fervently opposes the New School implementation.

Since 2011, with the exception of a few voices within the Parliament, the question of the implementation of the New School program for religion had remained in abeyance.

Though evaluated through a pilot scheme until September 2014, the New School only returned to the forefront following SYRIZA's second electoral victory in September 2015(13). A

month after the elections, in October 2015, former Greek Minister of Education, Nikos Filis, announced his decision to reform the class of religious education, liberating it from its mono-religious focus on Christian Orthodoxy and rendering it more pluralistic through the implementation of the New School program.

In the following months, the debate over the implementation of the New School evolved in an intense controversy between the left-wing government of SYRIZA, its right-wing, nationalist coalition partner, ANEL, and the Orthodox Church. While Archbishop Ieronymos made statements repeatedly opposing the New School program, the Pan-Hellenic Union of Theologians attacked Filis directly and asked for his resignation (14), arguing, amongst other things, that the New School program of religious education violated Article 16 of the Constitution, which establishes amongst the objectives of education “the development of students’ national and religious consciousness”(15). In April 2016, Archbishop Ieronymos held a meeting with PM Alexis Tsipras, where the former reportedly expressed his dissatisfaction

with Minister Filis’ determination to alter the class of religious education (16). On September 28 of the same year, following two Ministerial Decrees(17), the Ministry of Education published the guidelines for the implementation of the new Program of Study for the class of Religion in primary school and in high school (18). The new program was meant to be implemented starting the school year 2016-2017.

In a subsequent meeting in October 2016 between Tsipras, Filis, members of the Holy Synod as well as a representative of SYRIZA’s conservative coalition partner, Panos Kammenos (Minister of Defense), the Archbishop added that such crucial questions extend beyond the scope of religious education and challenge the very foundations of the historic church-state relations in Greece (19). Only a few weeks later, on November 5, 2016, Tsipras replaced Filis with Giorgos Gavroglou in a

government reshuffle. Though the new Education Minister has maintained a more moderate tone than his predecessor, he has expressed his determination to also proceed with the reform of the class of religion.

The theological unions, too, remain deeply opposed: on the one hand the members of "Kairos" seek to implement the new program and they have been participating in training seminars to prepare accordingly and, on the other, the more conservative ones, members or supporter of the Pan-Hellenic Union, who either remain skeptical or vehemently oppose the new program. While this debate is ongoing in the media, amongst politicians and theologians, the Greek Council of State issued a ruling on the specific reform of religious education. On March 20, 2018, and following the appeal of the Holy Metropolis of Piraeus (including others) who challenged the implementation of the New School of religious education, the Council of State deemed Filis' reform of the class of religion in primary and middle school unconstitutional (Decision 660/2018). The decision stated, specifically, that the government's plan "distorted the purpose of [religious] teaching, which is, according to the Constitution, to develop pupils' Orthodox Christian conscience"²⁰. A month later, on April 25, the same court deemed unconstitutional and contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights the changes introduced by Filis to the way religion is taught also in high schools:

"In accordance with the constitutional principle of equality and the provisions of articles 9 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the State cannot, by regulating the content of religious course, deprive students of a particular religion of the right which it recognizes to students belonging to other religions, to teach exclusively the doctrines of their faith." In spite of the Council of State decisions, current SYRIZA Education Minister, Giorgos Gavroglou, announced that the new program for religious

education will be implemented in primary and secondary levels of education from the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year. On March 21 he stated, specifically, that the reforms will preserve “the core of Filis’ proposals” and that the government “shall not succumb to such voices of obscurantism” (21).

Papageorgiou and Others v Greece: the issues of exemption and religious education before the Strasbourg Court.

The above issues on the New Programme for religious education as well as on exemption from the class of religion are currently addressed in a case from Greece that has reached the European Court of Human Rights.

The applicants are inhabitants of two small islands in the Aegean Sea, and parents of students in primary school and high school. They complain that the content of the class of religious education is confessional, based on the instructions and demands of the Greek Orthodox Church, in a way that is neither neutral nor objective. As the applicants are not Christian Orthodox, they do not wish to follow the specific class of religion, whose character is catechetical. The procedure that the parents have to follow consists, according to the government circular, of the submission of an exemption declaration form, stating that they are not Christian Orthodox and claiming reasons of religious conscience as part of their request for exemption. The applicants argue that the fact that they have to openly declare their convictions and that the school director should then verify their declarations may lead, particularly within the small society of the islands, to the stigmatization of the student and their parents: first because it would become obvious that the latter do not follow the beliefs of the “dominant religion” and, second, because the students would be deprived of teaching hours on the basis of their religious or philosophical convictions. In their appeal, they therefore claim a violation of Articles 8 and 14 (combined), 9 and 14 (combined) and of Article 2 of Protocol

no1 of the ECHR.

The applicants had moreover requested from the Council of State that their case be treated as one of absolute urgency and adjudicated before the beginning of the 2017- 2018 school year (and, specifically, before the start of the school year on September 11, 2017). The Council of State, however, scheduled a hearing for October 12, 2017, which was subsequently postponed to November 9, then to December 14 and, finally, to February 8, 2018. The applicants then chose to bring the matter before the Strasbourg Court at this stage, arguing that in this case they did not have an effective national remedy. For this reason, the Rapporteur has proposed to ask a question, amongst others, concerning the exhaustion of remedies:

- In view of the successive postponements of the examination of cases by the Council of State and the unlikelihood that it will render its decision during the 2017-2018 school year, may the applicants be considered, in this case, as being exempt from exhausting the domestic remedies?
- Do the obligation of the applicant parents to declare, on their behalf, that their petitioning daughters are not Christian Orthodox so that they are granted exemption from religion courses, the retention of these statements in the school records and the investigation to be conducted by the school director about the veracity of those declarations infringe the rights of students for the respect of their private life, guaranteed by Article 8 combined with Article 14?
- Does the obligation of the applicants to disclose that their daughters are not Christian Orthodox so that they are granted exemption from religious classes violate the rights of the latter guaranteed by Article 9 combined with Article 14 (the right not to manifest their religion)?
- In fulfilling its educational functions, has the respondent State ensured that information or knowledge in the curriculum

of religion classes for the school year 2017/2018 will be:
– diffused in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner, consistent with the first sentence of Article 2 of Protocol No. 1?

– respectful of religious and philosophical convictions of the applicant parents, in accordance with the second sentence of Article 2 of Protocol No. 1?

In the meantime, while the Council of State had agreed to finally hear the case on May 4, 2018, the hearing was postponed to an unknown date. According to the lawyer of the applicants, they will now appeal directly to the Strasbourg Court.

*Margarita Markoviti, 'Greece: report on Religious Education', Grassrootsmobilise Research Programme Report, 25 April 2018, Available at <http://grassrootsmobilise.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2018/04/RE-Report-2.pdf>

1 Εγκύκλιος Γ2/61723/13-06-2002

2 Decision no. 77A/2002.

3 Εγκύκλιος 91190/Γ2/10-7-2008.

4 See <https://www.synigoros.gr/?i=human-rights.el.danews.33735>.

5 Εγκύκλιος Φ12/977/109744/Γ1/26-8-2008.

6 See https://www.synigoros.gr/resources/7083_4_thrisk14_11_2008.pdf.

7 Εγκύκλιος 133099/Γ2/10-09-2013.

8 <http://www.petheol.gr/nea/ypomnematesspethprostonypourgopaideias>

9 Εγκύκλιος 12773/Δ2/23-01-2015.

10 See "Αναγνωστοπούλου: Χωρίς αιτιολόγηση η απαλλαγή από τα θρησκευτικά." [Anagnostopoulou: No justification for exemption from Religious Education.], September 25, 2015, To Vima:

<http://www.tovima.gr/society/article/?aid=740572>

11 Yangazoglou, Stavros. 2011. "Τα Καινοτομικά στοιχεία του Νέου ΠΣ στα Θρησκευτικά" [The New School and the Innovative Features of the Program of Study in Religious Education]: http://e-theologia.blogspot.gr/2011/10/blogpost_7251.html

12 "Νέο Σχολείο: Οδηγός Εκπαιδευτικού στα Θρησκευτικά Δημοτικού-Γυμνασίου" [New School: Teacher's Guide for Religious Education in Primary School and Gymnasio]. Ministry of Education and Religions, Institute of Educational Policy. Revised edition, Athens 2014, p.88: <http://blogs.sch.gr/gkapetanak/files/2015/10/0δηγός-Εκπαιδευτικού-στα->

[Θρησκευτικά-Δημοτικού-Γυμνασίου-10.12.2014.pdf](http://blogs.sch.gr/gkapetanak/files/2015/10/0δηγός-Εκπαιδευτικού-στα-Θρησκευτικά-Δημοτικού-Γυμνασίου-10.12.2014.pdf)

13 The initial creators of the New School (who were in charge of the subjects of Religion and History) had designed religious education as an elective class in the cluster of "Social Sciences", on the basis of the "Religious Studies" course

of the International Baccalaureate. According to one of the initial creators, following reactions by the Orthodox Church, this version was eventually dropped. Education Minister Anna Diamantopoulou then assigned a new team to work on the New School program of religious education, which kept both the compulsory nature of the class and its emphasis on Christian Orthodoxy.

14

<http://www.cnn.gr/news/ellada/story/47439/theologoi-zitoy-n-par-aitisi-fili-proeidopoioy-n-me-apoxi-apo-ti-didaskalia>

15 Though the Constitution does not explicitly state that such "religious consciousness" is based on the teachings of the Christian Orthodox Church, the main argument of those who oppose any changes to the class of religion is that this Article should be read in conjunction with Article 3 of the Constitution, which establishes the Orthodox Church as the "prevailing religion of the state" (See Markoviti, M. 2018, 'In-between the Constitution and the ECtHR: Mobilizations

around Religion and Education in Greece', Politics and Religion).

16

<https://www.news.gr/politikh/esoterikh-politikh/article/260853/mystikh-synanthsh-tsipra-ieronymoy-gia-filh-kai.html>

17 Decree 143575/Δ2/07-09-2016, ΦΕΚ Β 2920/13.09.2016 for primary and middle school (dimotiko and gymnasio) and Decree 143579/Δ2/07-09-2016, ΦΕΚ Β 2906/13.09.2016 for high school (lykeio).

18

<https://www.minedu.gov.gr/dimotiko-2/didaktea-yli-dimot/23968-28-09-16-odigies-efarmogis-ton-neonprogrammaton-spoudon-tou-mathimatos-ton-thriskeftikon-sto-dimotiko-sto-gymnasio-kai-sto-lykeio-5>

19

<https://www.newsit.gr/politikh/kammenos-se-ieronimo-an-thes-na-rikso-tin-kyvernisi-tha-to-kano/1248031/>

20

<http://www.ekathimerini.com/226954/article/ekathimerini/news/court-deems-changes-to-school-religion-classesunconstitutional>

21

<http://www.avgi.gr/article/10839/8786725/k-gabroglou-kratame-ton-pyrena-ton-protaseon-gia-ta-nea-programmataspoudon-tou-nphile>

RUSSIA: A second Jehovah's Witness behind bars

HRWF (29.04.2018) – On 10 April 2018, police came to the home of 32-year-old Anatoliy Vilitkevich and took him into custody, accusing him of organizing the activity of an extremist organization. Vilitkevich was merely considering Bible-based

publications with a small group of others who also were subjected to searches.

Two days later, the Leninskiy District Court of Ufa (Republic of Bashkortostan, Russia), ruled to keep Anatoliy in pre-trial detention for 1 month and 22 days, that is, until June 2, 2018. Anatoliy faces up to 10 years imprisonment.

Anatoliy is the first Russian Jehovah's Witness to be held in detention since the Supreme Court's banning decision of 20 April 2017.

It is unclear why Jehovah's Witnesses in Ufa are suddenly being targeted, but authorities claim to have "volumes" of information against the local Witnesses.

The legal team for Anatoliy filed an appeal regarding his detention on 16 April but it was denied three days later.

Dennis Christensen in prison since May 2017

On May 25, 2017, heavily armed police officers and agents of the Federal Security Service (FSB) disrupted a peaceful weekly religious service of Jehovah's Witnesses in Oryol, Russia. Since authorities there had liquidated the Oryol Local Religious Organization (LRO) in June 2016 on extremism charges, they alleged that the congregation's religious services were continuing the activity of an extremist organization.

The prosecutor initiated criminal charges against Dennis Christensen, one of the elders in the Oryol Congregation, for his role in the congregation's religious services. The Sovietskiy District Court ordered that Mr. Christensen be held in pretrial detention. His trial is currently ongoing.

250 violations of the rights of JW in 1 year

Since the Russian Supreme Court ruled to ban the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses a year ago (20 April 2017), there have

been at least 250 violations of the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, including attacks, vandalism, and other kinds of discrimination. Seventeen of their properties have been confiscated, and lawsuits have been launched to seize another 52 properties.

These most recent raids represent a serious escalation of state-sponsored human rights abuse, reminiscent of Soviet era repression and Nazi persecution experienced by minority groups in the early days of these former regimes. Without international awareness, it can be expected that this situation will increase in both severity and frequency in the days ahead.

BRUNEI: Next phase of Shariah penal code underway

Borneo Bulletin (11.03.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Et5Sdl> -Towards the implementation of the next phase of the Shariah Penal Code 2013, a draft on Criminal Procedures Code on Shariah (CPC Shariah) has been approved by the Brunei Islamic Religious Council and has been consented to by His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam for gazetting.

Elaborating on the details on the Shariah Penal Code 2013 at the fifth day of the 14th Legislative Council session yesterday, YB Pehin Udana Khatib Dato Paduka Seri Setia Ustaz Haji Awang Badaruddin bin Pengarah Dato Paduka Haji Awang Othman, the Minister of Religious Affairs, shared the first phase has been implemented on May 1, 2014, while the next

phase will be carried out according to the right administrative time.

The minister added that the phased implementation of Shariah Penal Code 2013 aimed to provide or enable strategic planning and early preparation in orderly manner and concrete actions by various relevant agencies including investigations, prosecution and judiciary with the implementation of sentences and penalties.

However, several other procedures need to be looked upon before the implementation of CPC Shariah whereby a grace period will be given especially for law practitioners, justice practitioners and execution of the sentences.

He added that the draft provides all rules (law) and prosecutions that will act as a guide for agencies and parties to implement their roles and responsibilities in upholding justice. Apart from CPC Shariah, provisions towards a number of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) have already been provided by all relevant parties in ensuring investigation procedures, prosecutions, trials and implementation of sentences are in accordance to the prescribed CPC Shariah.

The minister explained that the SOPs involved coordination of religious enforcement division and the Royal Brunei Police Force (RBPF) that relate with investigations and enforcement; for prosecution and collaborative coordination with the Shariah prosecutor division and the attorney generals; for Hudud and Qisas that relate with trial at Shariah court; for executions of sentences under the Syariah Penal Code 2013 (involving whipping, death sentences, imprisonment, cutting of hands and feet as penalties, stoning and Qisas).

There is also an SOP for medical officers at the Ministry of Health that acts as the Manual Working Procedure and Reference Term for the ministry in implementing Shariah Law.

Other sources

<https://barnabasfund.org/en/news/brunei-government-signs-off-on-next-stage-of-sharia>

[Brunei government signs off on next stage of sharia](#)

FINLAND: Defence Ministry reconsiders Jehovah's Witnesses military exemption

YLE News (06.04.2018) – Men are granted waivers from conscription if they can show they are active members of the denomination. All other men must carry out either military or non-military service.

The Finnish Defence Ministry has set up a panel to reconsider the exemption from conscription granted to members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The non-mainstream Christian denomination urges its members not to participate in military service, even in unarmed roles.

The ministry said on Friday that it has established a working group to consider revising the legislation that waives Jehovah's Witnesses' obligation to perform military service.

All Finnish men aged 18 to 60 must carry out either military or non-military service. Under current law, a man can be granted a deferment of service for three years at a time as long as he can certify that he is an active member of a Jehovah's Witnesses congregation.

“Problematic” from equality standpoint

The Defence Ministry says that previous studies of the issue have found the current practice to be problematic, particularly from the standpoint of equality.

The legislation on Jehovah's Witnesses' conscription was originally passed as a special act before the present constitution came into force.

The committee is to complete its work by late June.

<https://bit.ly/2H7GYW3>

Kazakhstan: Pentecostals shut down by the authorities

Russia Religion News (29.03.2018) – Religia i Pravo (28.03.2018) –

<https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/180330b.html> – An account of charges for an administrative violation of law has been composed against a resident of Whymkent of South Kazakhstan oblast, Dilobarkhon Sultanova, after she showed a casual acquaintance how to download the Bible from the application "Play Market." It is planned to try the woman for "evangelism."

Dilobarkhon Sultanova described how on 11 January of this year police arrested her under the pretext of checking documents and took her to the police department, the Christian megaportal Invictory.com reports, with a reference to Radio Azattyk.

After spending an hour in the police department, she learned that a statement had been written against her by an acquaintance, Elmira Inibekova. Sultanova had become

acquainted with her in the “New Life” protestant church in December of last year, at Christmas. Dilobarkhon herself says that she saw Inibekova personally only twice, and she also corresponded with her on the WhatsApp application.

“She wrote me first on WhatsApp. She asked me to come outside and download for her a Bible on her telephone from ‘Play Market.’ Literally after a minute and a half, we parted, and I was arrested. And before this Inibekova had asked me to get a Bible in printed form for her,” Dilobarkhon Sultanova noted.

The Christian emphasized that the Bible is accessible in the “Play Market” app along with all the other books of religious significance (for example, the Quran).

“The Bible is in open access and it does not belong to any single religious association. Besides it is not a religious application (for downloading),” Dilobarkhon Sultanova noted.

The record of charges for the administrative violation of law says that on 11 January of this year, Dilobarkhon Sultanova “disseminated the ideology of the ‘New Life’ religious association, and urged citizen Elmira Inibekova to study the sacred book of the Bible for the purpose of drawing her into the ranks of adherents of the ideology of the ‘New Life’ religious association.”

Sultanova maintains that she never engaged in preaching activity. She said that “she did not disseminate any ideology and she was acquainted with this citizen in church that she [the woman] frequently attended and she was interested in the religious association.”

In addition, Sultanova says, a staff member of the directorate for religious affairs of the South Kazakhstan oblast refused to provide for her a lawyer, which she needed, and did not provide translations of materials of the case and the record of charges in Russian. Only after filing a complaint in the prosecutor’s office in the department for combating corruption

did the situation change somehow, the woman says. The Christian also wrote a complaint to the court against the action of the staff member of the directorate for religious affairs of the South Kazakhstan oblast regarding violation of her rights.

The court was supposed to begin consideration of the administrative violation of law regarding Dilobarkhon Sultanova last week, but it was postponed for an indefinite period of time, since it was originally planned to consider the woman's complaint against the directorate for religious affairs of the South Kazakhstan oblast for violation of her rights.

The pastor of the "New Life" church, Zhetis Rauilov, notes that this incident is not the first in a series of prosecutions of their church by local authorities, and they began finding various violations in the organization back in July of last year. At the time, representatives of the sanitary and epidemiological station arrived on the basis of a complaint by citizens that they supposedly had killed a dog in their church. Rauilov says that it had been hit by a car and the perpetrators were not found.

Now by decision of the court, based on claims of the fire fighting service about shortage of fire detectors in the premises, the activity of the church has been suspended and a fine of 100 times monthly income has been assessed on the organization. (tr. by PDS, posted 29 March 2018)