

RUSSIA: Government criticizes Putin for treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses

Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights calls out religious discrimination.

By Derek Welch

World Religion News (22.06.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2NKXtLf> – In a surprising move, a branch of the Russian government has called out the actions of their government's police and judicial forces in the enforcement of the ban of Jehovah Witnesses.

The ban occurred last year when the Russian Supreme Court labeled the religious denomination an "extremist organization." This has led to arrests of over a dozen Jehovah's Witnesses, the closing of all administrative and religious worship buildings, and near constant harassment by police forces for the private practice of their faith. Several wives of arrested Jehovah's Witnesses created a joint statement begging for their release.

The Presidential Council is designed to help assist the Russian president in protecting human rights. In a written statement, the organization questioned the actions of the past year, saying "It cannot but be a cause for concern because the criminal prosecutions and detentions have taken on a systemic character."

This comes at a unique time for human rights and Russia. The country deflected demands by the United States to release over a hundred political and religious prisoners earlier in the

week, including Jehovah's Witnesses. The United States pressure was labeled Western propaganda.

Conversely, Russia has been proposing that it takes the United States spot on the United Nations Human Rights Council. The United States announced pulling out of the international body earlier this week.

Given the authoritarian control Putin has over the government, the actions of the presidential council may be purely a symbolic measure to prevent criticism from the West and gain support for their bid to join the UN Human Rights Council. It is unclear what steps will be taken and what the lasting effect will be on the government. What is not addressed in the letter is the physical violence and threats that have occurred from vigilante groups and private citizens, which seem emboldened by the government's law and police actions.

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