

What is the future of Jehovah's Witnesses?

HRWF (23.01.2017) – On 17th January, an article entitled "Even Stalin could not eliminate Jehovah's Witnesses" was published by Anton Bykov on the website of Open Russia (<https://openrussia.org/notes/705489/>) and translated by Russia Religion News (Stetson University):

"The Jehovah's Witnesses—one of the largest religious organizations in the world—may be banned in Russia because of the distribution of extremist literature. In several cities adherents of this organization have already found themselves outside the law. Law enforcement agencies have pursued Jehovahists for several years, and after the adoption of the anti-extremist law in the country several regional congregations have been liquidated and witnesses have been subjected to criminal prosecution. However in the past year the prosecutor general began a decisive attack on Jehovah's Witnesses, threatening to enter the organizations into the list of extremists. In that case, all of its branches will be closed and the Jehovahists themselves, who number in Russia about 100,000, will be deprived of the possibility of openly professing their religious views.

On Monday, 16 January, a Moscow city court declined to satisfy an appeal filed by Jehovah's Witnesses against the action of the prosecutor general's office. Thereby the decision of a lower instance, which earlier had recognized as legal the warning about the impermissibility of committing extremist activity issued by the prosecutor's office against the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses, remained in force.

Attorneys for the organization have pointed out that in the ruling of the agency there are several legal contradictions. Eighty-eight publications of Jehovah's Witnesses structures have been ruled to be extremist in Russia. Deputy prosecutor general Viktor Grin concluded that this fact is sufficient to issue a warning to the central office of the organization. At the same time the Jehovahists themselves maintain that the offices of the prosecutor that initiated an investigation of these materials have consistently opposed the statements of the Administrative Center in the trial of this case.

"When the prosecutor's office acted with an initiative one after another to find our books and brochures extremist, then the Administrative Center sent to the court a petition that the organization be included in the case as an interested party, so that we would be able to join the case and defend these publications, doctrinal books of our religion. However the prosecutor's office protested that we would participate in the case. They maintained that the Administrative Center is neither the author nor publisher of these materials. These are conducted by foreign organizations. It turns out that we have nothing to do with the publication of the forbidden books and brochures, but in the end the case is turned against us. That is, the office of the prosecutor general contradicts its own position," a representative of the press service of the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses, Ivan Belenko, told Open Russia.

How they can now correct the "violations," the Jehovahists do not fully understand. Belenko said that the prosecutor's office has not demanded the removal from circulation of the materials ruled to be extremist: "We did this on the basis of our own decision. All local religious organizations that are members of our structure were sent letters requesting that they stop distributing materials banned by courts, which was also done."

The Russian branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses does not any longer order books and brochures that are included in the Federal List of Extremist Materials. This argument was left without attention in court and the prosecutor's office continues to, and the prosecutor's office continues to expand the collection of accusations, searching for old publications that were distributed in Russia in prior decades. In order to fine believers and to file lawsuits for the liquidation of regional branches, prosecutors in particular have used falsified testimony, Belenklo thinks.

Jehovists have counted now more than 60 cases where law enforcement agencies or persons obviously cooperating with them were guilty of forgery. Several of these incidents were captured by cameras of video surveillance. Belenko maintains that courts have refused to include these video tapes in materials of cases.

He said that the most egregious case occurred in Voronezh in October of last year. To conduct a worship service, local activists of Jehovah's Witnesses rented the "Energiiia" sports complex. More than 600 persons assembled for the event, but just at the time of the addresses of the elders, personnel of the police burst into the premises and halted the service. Eyewitnesses describe how the police inspected the bags and pockets of believers. Operatives found a package with forbidden books in flowerbeds on stage.

Jehovists insist that these books were planted on them in the night before the service. They said that police obviously knew where to search. As a result, the Voronezh court suspended for 45 days the activity of the local religious organization, finding the congregation guilty of distributing extremist materials.

As of today, seven regional branches of Jehovah's Witnesses have been liquidated by judicial decisions. Four of them—in Belgorod, Stary Oskol, Orel, and Elista—were liquidated by courts in 2016, and in 2015 a branch in Abinsk was closed and the Samara and Taganrog branches were closed in 2014 and 2009 respectively. Also in Taganrog 16 persons were convicted for continuing the activity of the congregation. Now four criminal cases have been opened with regard to adherents of the Jehovah's Witnesses religion. In three cases the charges were based on article 282 (Inciting hatred or hostility) and in one case on article 239 (Creation of a noncommercial organization infringing the rights of citizens).

Thus in the Sergiev Posad city court a criminal case is now being considered that was opened with regard to elders of the local congregation, Viacheslav Stepanov and Andrei Spivak. The accusation was issued against them back in 2013 on the basis of operational audio and video recordings of believers' meetings that the operatives got with the aid of hidden cameras mounted in handbags.

Initially Stepanov and Spivak were accused of making statements that incited religious enmity and quoting forbidden brochures that contained negative characterizations of other religious organizations. After consideration of arguments presented by both sides and the conduct of a repeated psycholinguistic expert analysis, on 4 March the Sergiev Posad court acquitted both elders, with the right of rehabilitation, but by the end of May a Moscow provincial court overturned this decision and returned the case for a new consideration.

The first mention of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia dates to 1877. While the organization was officially registered in the Russian empire in September 1913. Under the soviet regime Jehovists were subjected to persecutions and they were arrested and exiled to the most distant parts of the country. In 1951 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses along with their families were exiled from western

Ukraine (the site of their main location) to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Far East, which facilitated the spread of the ideas of this organization in places of exile.

The Jehovah's Witnesses received official registration in the Russian federation in March 1991, and in the next year there occurred for the first time in history an international congress of the organization on the territory of the former USSR. The Russian Orthodox Church immediately determined their attitude toward Jehovah's Witnesses, consigning them to the category of religious organizations harmful for the church, society, and the state. Despite this, in March 1996 by order of President Boris Yeltsin exiled Jehovahists were completely rehabilitated and recognized as victims of political repression.

The principal phase of the campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses began in 2008. At that time a letter was sent to all branches of the prosecutor's office, signed by deputy prosecutor general Viktor Grin, requiring the start of a mass inspection of the activity of all congregations. After this throughout Russia there began searches and arrests of Jehovahists; worship services were regularly interrupted; and religious books associated with the organization were one after another placed in the list of extremist materials.

Two years earlier, the Golovin district court of Moscow ordered the liquidation of the Moscow congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses and its activity was prohibited. Attorneys of the organization filed suit in the European Court of Human Rights, which in 2010 established the occurrence of violation of a number of articles of the European Convention in the Russian court's decision banning the activity of the capital division of Jehovahists. The registration of the congregation was restored only in 2015, ten years after its prohibition.

As of the present, in Russia Jehovah's Witnesses occupy sixth place in the number of registered religious associations, trailing Orthodox, Muslim, Pentecostals, Baptists, and Adventists.

"It is hard for us to say why actions of law enforcement agencies regarding Jehovah's Witnesses have been activated at this time. Whatever we may say on this will be speculation. But for us this is not something unexpected or surprising. Everything that is happening now in the country only confirms the prophetic words of Jesus Christ to the effect that his followers will be hated, persecuted, and prosecuted," Belenko says.

The organization thinks that the prosecutor general's warning issued to the Administrative Center will lead to a new round of the campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses, "discriminating and restricting religious liberties," If the Administrative Center is closed and included in the list of extremist organization, the threat of liquidation will face all regional branches, which now number about 400 throughout the country.

However, the Jehovahists are Stoic minded. "It is possible to liquidate judicially, but faith remains an integral part of a person. The constitution says that nobody can be forced to renounce his opinions or convictions. Nothing prevents us from professing our religion," Belenko added. "This is just the first warning; in the future we will appeal it in both domestic and international instances."

The director of the "Sova" Center for News and Analysis, Alexander Verkhovsky, also thinks that it is premature to speak of the liquidation of the Jehovah's Witnesses. He recalls that the law does not precisely establish a number of possible warnings, but in practice an organization is usually closed after two warnings.

"The Jehovah's Witnesses are not the first religious organization in modern history that was persecuted by law enforcement agencies, but this is a special case. The pressure on them has extended now for eight years, and in all this time its case has not been understood. Some of the charges against them are ridiculous, but of course it is possible to expect the closing of the central department of Jehovah's Witnesses, and in that case other representatives of the organization should be closed," Verkhovsky notes.

The rights activist thinks that persecution of Jehovahists is not a part of a trend of enforcement of the norms of antiextremist legislation connected with recent cases regarding Krishnaites, protestants, and other religious organizations: "Whereas in the case of Krishnaites or, for example, Seventh-day Adventists, the issue is local abuses provoked by the 'Yarovaya Package," that is, there is no basis for their elimination, but in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses such a basis apparently exists. Although I do not understand how it can be achieved; even Stalin was not able to eliminate them." (tr. by PDS, posted 20 January 2017)