

After the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Scientology seems to be the next priority target

Russian authorities raid Church of Scientology in St Petersburg

HRWF (09.06.2017) – On 6 June, over sixty Federal Security Bureau (FSB) officials and SWAT police raided the Church of Scientology's branch in St. Petersburg and the homes of church members as part of a probe into allegations of illegal entrepreneurship, incitement of hatred, and extremism.

Five leaders of the group were arrested, detained and interrogated by the FSB. Four of them - Anastasia Terentieva, Galina Shurinova, Ivan Matsitskiy and Sakhilb Aliev - were sentenced to two months pretrial detention on 7th and 8th June, 2017 by the Court. This maximum pretrial sentence may be extended before it expires. The fifth arrested local leader, lawyer Konstanci Esaulkova, has a hearing on 9th June 2017 regarding her pretrial detention.

If convicted, these five individuals could face a six to ten-year prison term.

Based on the search warrants and public statements made by the FSB, the raid took place as a result of charges concerning Article 171 (illegal commercial activity without registration) and Articles 282 and 282.1 of the criminal code (extremism). The charge of illegal commercial activity without proper registration of a legal entity and its subsequent investigation opened last year. The extremism charges are new as no court has ever made such a finding.

The 6 June raid on the U.S.-based church comes after Russia's Supreme Court in April issued a ruling banning Jehovah's Witnesses and seizing their property.

The FSB said the probe was initially launched into the church's earnings from selling educational materials to new recruits.

The Moscow Regional Court ruled in 2012 that some books of the Church of Scientology be included on the Federal List of Extremist Literature and prohibited from distribution in Russia. Complaints against Russia are pending in Strasbourg on this issue.

In 2015 the Moscow Church was also ordered to "liquidate" itself on the grounds that its name is trademarked in the United States and is therefore not a religious organisation. However, their case is pending at the European Court in Strasbourg.

The Church of Scientology was first registered officially in Russia in 1994 but the authorities have pursued it through the courts in recent years. In 2007, 2009 and 2014, the European Court of Human Rights ruled twice in favor of the Church, saying that Russia violated its rights by refusing to re-register the Church of Scientology of Moscow (*Church of Scientology Moscow v. Russia, Application no. 18147/02*), Nizhnekamsk and Surgut (*Kimlya and Others v. Russia, Applications nos. 76836/01 and 32782/03*) and St Petersburg (*Church of Scientology of St Petersburg and Others v. Russia, Application no. 47191/06*). In each case, the decision of the European Court acknowledged that there had been a violation of Article 9 of the European Convention, which protects freedom of religion or belief. However, Russia did not implement the judgment.

Three of the imprisoned leaders of the Church were applicants in the successful ECHR case to register the Church. Now they are being imprisoned on the grounds that they are operating a group that is not legally registered...

The Church of Scientology was founded in the United States in 1954 by science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard and was accorded the status of a religion in the U.S. in 1993.

Arrests and imprisonment

On 8 June, the Nevsky District Court of St. Petersburg on Wednesday ordered the detention of executive director of Church of Scientology local religious group, **Galina Shurinova**, until August 5.

Shurinova is officially charged with participating in an extremist organization, illegal business, inciting hatred and enmity, and violation of human dignity. The accusation of "illegal commercial activities" could be used against the Church because the Russian authorities had refused to re-register it as a religious organization and as a non-profit association years ago, despite the decision of the European Court which recognized that it was a religious or belief community. Exhaustion of domestic remedies on this case recently occurred and the Church is in the process of going back to Strasbourg on this matter.

Law enforcement officers have seized literature banned in Russia as extremist during searches at her premises, an investigator said in court.

According to the FSB, Shurinova is the main manager of Church of Scientology of St. Petersburg and exercises control over cash inflow. From 2013 to 2016, the organization allegedly received over 276 million rubles (\$4.9 million) for rendering its services.

However, the Church of Scientology of St. Petersburg has not been incorporated under the law, an FSB representative noted in court.

Shurinova motioned for house arrest or release on bail.

On 7 June, the court detained two other managers of Church of Scientology of St. Petersburg, **Tatyana Terentyeva** and **Sakhiliev**.

At a conference on religious freedom in Russia held at the European Parliament on 6 June, **Human Rights Without Frontiers** denounced the misuse of the accusation of extremism (without use of violence) against and the banning of peaceful religious movements such as Jehovah's Witnesses and two Muslim religious groups, Tablighi Jamaat and Said Nursi followers.

As the international community, including the EU, has remained silent every time each of these groups has been banned, Putin will continue his strategy of eliminating other 'unknown' or 'unpopular' religious minorities in breach of its obligations under international law and in total impunity as long as there is no foreign reaction.

Human Rights Without Frontiers urges the EU institutions to monitor more closely Putin's policy of eradication of non-Orthodox minorities in the name of the "spiritual security concept" and to voice its concerns about the present situation of all religious minorities in Russia.