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Danish Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen's custody extended another five months

Stetson Russia Religion News (23.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2GPm0Yc> - The detention in custody of the Dane Dennis Christensen was extended until at least 1 August 2018; he has already been held in the investigation cell for about nine months because he professes the religion of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The decision on 22 February 2018 to extend the detention was issued by Aleksei Rudnev, a judge of the Zheleznodorozhnyi district court of the city of Orel.

Meanwhile, the start of the principal hearings in the criminal case regarding Dennis Christensen was scheduled for 26 February 2018. He is accused of continuing the activity of the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, which was liquidated by a court. In fact, Christensen does not have anything to do with this organization. He only exercised the right that is guaranteed by the constitution of the Russian federation to "everybody," namely the right to have religious convictions and to act in accordance with them. (tr. by PDS, posted 23 February 2018)

RUSSIA: Two criminal trials, three criminal investigations

By Victoria Arnold

Forum 18 (20.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2sSher1> - *The criminal trial of Danish Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen, accused of "continuing the activities of a banned extremist organisation", began in Oryol after nearly nine months' detention. Investigators launched three similar criminal investigations against Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgorod, Kemerovo and Oryol. Arkady Akopyan is on trial for inciting religious hatred.*

Investigators in two regions of Russia have initiated the first criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses for "continuing the activities of a banned extremist organisation" since the Supreme Court's ruling outlawing all Jehovah's Witness activity came into force in July 2017. Another criminal case elsewhere was initiated because of an earlier ban on a local Jehovah's Witness community.

Mass law enforcement raids in Belgorod in southern European Russia and Kemerovo in Siberia resulted in detentions, house searches, interrogations, and the placing of several people under investigation under Criminal Code Article 282.2 ("Continuing the activities of a banned extremist organisation") (see below).

The Investigative Committee has announced that it has opened another case against a Jehovah's Witness in Oryol, this time under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in the activities of a banned extremist organisation") (see below).

Meanwhile, the first hearing in the trial of Danish Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Dennis Christensen took place in Oryol on 19 February. Christensen has spent nearly nine months in pre-trial detention. He too faces charges under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1, although his case derives from an earlier ban on a local community, not the nationwide liquidation (see below).

The trial of former Jehovah's Witness leader Arkady Akopyan is continuing in Prokhladny in the North Caucasus. Akopyan has been charged under Criminal Code Article 282, Part 1 ("Actions directed at the incitement of hatred [nenavist] or enmity [vrazhda], as well as the humiliation of an individual or group of persons on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, attitude to religion, or social group"). His latest hearing was due on 20 February. He is not under arrest, but is under restrictions at home (see below).

Prosecutors have also long used Criminal Code Article 282.2 against Muslims who read the works of late Turkish theologian Said Nursi. People who meet to study his writings can be accused of continuing the activities of "Nurdzhular", an organisation which the Supreme Court banned as "extremist" in 2008 but which Muslims in Russia deny has ever existed.

At least three Muslims who read Nursi's works are known to be on trial, two in Krasnoyarsk in Siberia and one in Izberbash in Dagestan. Two other men have also been charged, one of whom is due to appear in court in Novosibirsk soon.

2017 saw the conviction of four Muslims under Article 282.2, Part 1, for alleged organisations of "cells" of "Nurdzhular".

Banned since July 2017

The Supreme Court's ruling that the Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre be declared an "extremist" organisation and its activities prohibited throughout Russia came into force on 17 July 2017, when an appeal panel upheld the original 20 April 2017 decision.

The Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre and all 395 local communities were added to the Justice Ministry's list of banned "extremist" organisations, alongside violent far-right and Islamist groups. They are also included on the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) list of "terrorists and extremists" whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (though in the case of Jehovah's Witness organisations, the state has already seized their assets).

Jehovah's Witnesses are in a unique position in Russia as the only centralised religious organisation with a nationwide presence which has been ruled "extremist" and liquidated, thus losing its legal personality and forfeiting its property.

Punishments

Amendments to the Criminal Code in July 2016 introduced harsher penalties for "extremism"-related offences; if convicted, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgorod and Kemerovo (and Christensen in Oryol) could be sentenced to the following under Criminal Code Article 282.2:

Part 1 – a fine of 400,000 to 800,000 Roubles (or two to four years' salary); or six to ten years' imprisonment followed by restrictions on pursuing certain jobs and activities for up to ten years and restrictions on freedom for one to two years;

Part 2 – a fine of 300,000 to 600,000 Roubles (or two to three years' salary); compulsory labour for one to four years with possible restrictions on pursuing certain jobs and activities for two to six years; or two to six years' imprisonment followed by restrictions on pursuing certain jobs and activities for up to five years or restrictions on freedom for up to a year.

For any defendant whose alleged offence took place before 20 July 2016 (such as the two Muslims on trial in Krasnoyarsk), earlier provisions remain in place.

Belgorod: Detentions, criminal investigations

Two Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgorod – Anatoly Shalyapin and Sergey Voykov – are under investigation for alleged offences under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2. After their arrest on the evening of 7 February, the men were held for 48 hours while police determined whether to keep them in custody or place them under lesser restrictive measures. After their release, police investigators placed both men under travel restrictions.

Police released other Jehovah's Witnesses detained at the same time after taking their passport details and fingerprints, although this process appears to have continued through the night, as the last detainee was allowed to leave only the following morning, according to a 9 February report on the jw-russia.org news website (which is administered from outside Russia).

Police issued the Jehovah's Witnesses with summons to return for questioning – it remains unclear whether further cases will be initiated, in addition to the one against Shalyapin and Voykov.

Those detained included a group of deaf people who had been meeting socially, Jehovah's Witnesses report.

Police carried out simultaneous raids on 16 homes in the city on 7 February, accompanied by armed officers of the Special Rapid Reaction Unit (SOBR) of the National Guard. SOBR exists to combat organised crime and terrorism.

In some cases, officers "threw people to the floor" or put them up against the wall, the jw-russia.org news website claimed. Jehovah's Witnesses described officers' behaviour during the subsequent searches as "rough" and "offensive". Police seized Bibles, electronic devices, passports, money, "and even photographs hanging on the wall".

According to jw-russia.org, during the interrogations which began on 8 February, investigators asked the Jehovah's Witnesses such questions as "Do you really believe

that at the Last Judgment everyone will die and you will survive?" and "How do you feel about President Putin?"

Police conducted four further searches in homes and a garage on 13 and 14 February, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Twelve investigators of the police Investigative Department have been assigned to the case. Asked about the case on 15 February, a police spokeswoman directed Forum 18 to Aleksei Goncharuk, head of the information and public relations department. He told Forum 18 on 19 February that an official request for information must be submitted in writing – Forum 18 did this in the afternoon of the Belgorod working day on 19 February. Forum 18 is yet to receive a response.

Neither Shalyapin nor Volkov yet appears on the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) list of "terrorists and extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze. According to Federal Tax Service records, neither was a founding member of the former Belgorod community of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The local Jehovah's Witness religious organisation in Belgorod was ruled extremist and ordered liquidated by Belgorod Regional Court in February 2016 – the community's activities officially ceased on 8 August 2016, according to Federal Tax Service records. None of its former members was prosecuted, however, before the Supreme Court's nationwide ban came into force.

Kemerovo: Raids, criminal investigations

In Kemerovo, law enforcement agents raided 12 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses on the evening of 23 January. In some cases, according to the jw-russia.org news website, armed and masked SOBR officers forced their way inside and made people stand against the wall or lie face-down on the floor. The Investigative Committee of Kemerovo Region led the operation, supported by the police and SOBR. At least ten officers appeared to have been assigned to search each household.

Officers denied the Jehovah's Witnesses' requests to make phone calls or summon a lawyer, the 9 February jw-russia.org report claims. Senior anti-extremism police officer Stanislav Shlagov allegedly responded to one such request by saying "We are not in America". Those whose homes were searched included elderly people, who were "in shock" and whose chronic health problems have been exacerbated by the experience.

Investigators confiscated phones, tablets, computers and computer drives, and personal belongings.

The raids were approved by Kemerovo's Central District Court. According to Investigative Committee Colonel Oksana Rybalkina's request to the court, seen by jw-russia.org, 14 people are suspected of "continuing the activities" of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Investigative Committee opened a case under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2, on 19 January, although it remains unclear how many people are now under investigation.

Jehovah's Witnesses have submitted 11 appeals to Kemerovo Regional Court against Central District Court's granting of permission for the house searches.

The Kemerovo Investigative Committee issued a statement on 1 February, claiming that the group "met regularly .. professed and disseminated their beliefs, including [through] preaching in public places and on residential premises, promoted the activity of a banned organisation, distributed associated literature .. and collected money for the carrying out of further illegal activity".

The books and sermons seized in the raids allegedly contained "statements that humiliate human dignity on the basis of attitude to religion, elements of propaganda of the exclusivity of one religion over another", it also claimed.

Investigators are checking whether the confiscated literature is on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, the statement adds. They will also initiate "expert analyses" "which will determine the roles of the members of the prohibited association".

When Forum 18 asked the Investigative Committee's Kemerovo Region branch exactly how many people are under criminal investigation, whether any of them are in detention or under house arrest, and why they were considered so dangerous that armed force was deemed necessary, spokeswoman Nadezhda Ananyeva directed Forum 18 to the Committee's federal-level office in Moscow.

Forum 18 submitted the same questions to the Moscow press office on 15 February, but has received no response by the end of the Moscow working day on 20 February.

Jehovah's Witnesses insist that they retain the right to practise their faith, despite the liquidation of the Administrative Centre and the prohibition on its activities.

The Supreme Court decision "prohibits citizens from acting on behalf of the legal entity, making deals, for example, transporting literature across the border on behalf of the religious organisation, [or] concluding rental contracts for premises where believers meet", Jehovah's Witness spokesman Yaroslav Sivulsky told Open Russia's mbk.media news website on 11 February, "but it does not prohibit them from gathering on any premises, from praying, or from talking about various topics".

Sivulsky added: "According to the Constitution, nobody can forbid citizens from visiting each other and praying to God, they cannot prohibit meetings in flats. And they were waiting for [the Belgorod Jehovah's Witnesses] outside their apartment doors, they detained them and took them away for interrogation, although the believers were acting within the law".

Prokhladny: Trial continues

The trial of seventy-year-old Jehovah's Witness elder Arkady Akopovich Akopyan is continuing at Prokhladny District Court in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkariya. He has undergone four hearings before Judge Oleg Golovashko so far in 2018, according to court records, with the latest on 20 February. His case is not directly related to the nationwide ban on Jehovah's Witnesses.

Akopyan stands accused of giving sermons which "degraded the dignity" of Orthodox and Muslim clergy and condoned Pussy Riot's demonstration in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow in 2012. Prosecutors also claim that he distributed banned "extremist" literature among his congregation.

The charges, under Criminal Code Article 282, Part 1, are based on the testimony of five witnesses (not members of the Jehovah's Witnesses), who claim that they distributed Jehovah's Witness literature on Akopyan's instructions and that Akopyan had criticised other religions in a sermon.

Akopyan has appealed to the Investigative Committee to investigate these witnesses for false testimony, but his request has not yet been considered.

Jehovah's Witnesses argue that being asked to distribute any literature after attending only a few meetings (as the five witnesses claimed) is "improbable in and of itself".

During the presentation of evidence by the defence, Akopyan's lawyers insisted that he did not make the speech of which he is accused.

According to a 1 February report on the jw-russia.org news website, they submitted to the court mobile phone data which show that the alleged witnesses were nowhere near the building used for Jehovah's Witness worship on the date in question.

Prosecutors claimed that worshippers were not allowed to bring phones to services, but according to Jehovah's Witnesses, "there is no ban on mobile phones", adding that "believers brought phones with them to worship and even broadcast the spiritual programme for those who were ill".

Akopyan's defence team also pointed out that the prosecution witnesses incorrectly described the internal layout of the building and composition of the religious groups which held services there, and presented multiple witness statements of their own, which attested that those five people had never been present at worship.

Akopyan's wife, Sonya Akopyan, who is not a Jehovah's Witness, also testified that her husband had never tried to force his religion on her or their children in the 25 years since he had converted.

If convicted, Akopyan may receive the following possible punishments: a fine of 300,000 to 500,000 Roubles; or 2 to 3 years' income; or compulsory labour (*prinutdelnaya rabota*) for 1 to 4 years with a ban on working in one's profession for up to 3 years; or 2 to 5 years' imprisonment.

Akopyan remains under travel restrictions, but has not been placed on the Rosfinmonitoring list of terrorists and extremists as of 20 February.

Oryol: Christensen's trial begins

Danish Jehovah's Witness Dennis Ole Christensen (born 18 December 1972) has made his first appearance at Oryol's Railway District Court on charges of "organising the activities of a banned extremist organisation" (Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1).

His preliminary hearing took place before Judge Aleksei Rudnev on 19 February, and was adjourned until 21 February, according to the court website. Defence lawyers are applying to have some "inadmissible evidence" excluded from the case, the jw-russia.org news website reported on 19 February.

Before trial, Christensen was permitted to acquaint himself with the case against him. The time he was allowed for this was, however, limited by court order, the jw-russia.org news website noted on 19 December 2017, and mandated to end on 25 December 2017. The only reason FSB security service investigators gave for making this request to the court was Christensen's use of an interpreter in reviewing the case materials, which comprise about 2,500 pages in eleven volumes.

Police and FSB security service operatives arrested Christensen at a Bible study meeting on 25 May 2017. Video footage posted online by local news site *Orlovskiy Novosti* shows armed personnel in body armour and balaclavas, accompanied by others in civilian clothes, entering a Kingdom Hall. The congregation inside was prevented from leaving while officers searched the building. Interrogations and searches of people's homes continued into the following morning, Jehovah's Witnesses reported.

The jw-russia.org news website points out that Christensen, who is married to a Russian citizen and works in construction, is in Oryol for personal reasons, "not at the invitation of any organisation".

The registered Oryol Jehovah's Witness community was ruled "extremist" and ordered liquidated in June 2016. Christensen's prosecution is derived from this local ban, and not the nationwide prohibition on Jehovah's Witness activities, which came into force in July 2017, after the case against him was initiated.

Christensen has not been added to the Rosfinmonitoring list of "terrorists and extremists" as of 20 February.

Oryol: New criminal investigation

The Oryol Region Investigative Committee has announced that it has opened another case against a Jehovah's Witness in Oryol, this time under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in the activities of a banned extremist organisation").

According to the 20 February statement, the accused person "took part in the holding of a religious gathering of [Jehovah's Witnesses], where he made a public speech containing propaganda of the banned organisation". Investigators are now engaged in "establishing all the circumstances of the crime committed", the statement concludes.

This case also appears to be derived from Oryol Regional Court's ban on the local Jehovah's Witness community, rather than the nationwide liquidation, as the alleged offence took place on 26 February 2017, according to the Investigative Committee.

Russia: 'Extremist' identified after five women killed in Dagestan church attack

World Watch Monitor (19.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2C9Gi0q> - Authorities in one of the least stable parts of Russia have identified the suspected gunman who killed five women at a church yesterday (18 February) before being shot dead by security forces.

The mayoral office in Kizlyar, in the restive and ethnically diverse region of Dagestan, named the assailant as Khalil Khalilov, 22.

An unnamed law-enforcement source quoted by the Russian state news agency, TASS, said the gunman was a local man suspected of having ties to "extremist" organisations.

The Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement but provided no evidence to support the claim.

Four were killed in the church and one died later in hospital after a man carrying a knife and a hunting rifle opened fire on worshippers at a Russian Orthodox church, TASS reported. Officials said five others were injured in the attack, one of them seriously. Three of the injured were Russian National Guard troops.

A local priest named as Fr. Pavel told local news media the gunman shouted "Allahu akbar" ("Allah is the greatest") and began firing as worshippers were leaving an afternoon service.

"We had finished the Mass and were beginning to leave the church," Fr. Pavel was quoted as saying on the Russian RBK website. "A bearded man ran toward the church shouting 'Allahu Akbar' and killed the people."

Members of the congregation said they prevented more people from being injured by closing the church door and stopping the attacker from entering the building.

Worshippers had just finished attending a Mass to mark Maslenitsa, the last few days before the beginning of Lent.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill condemned the attack as an attempt to stir up division between Muslims and Christians. "The patriarch considers this heinous crime on the Great Lent eve as a provocation aimed at sparking hostilities [between] Orthodox believers and Muslims who have been living side by side in peace in the Caucasus for centuries," he said.

Dagestan, a republic of Russia, is part of the North Caucasus, where a very conservative form of Islam has gained prominence over the traditional Sufi Islam practised there. According to Open Doors' World Watch List of countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian, Christians in Dagestan and neighbouring Chechnya face pressure, most notably converts from Islam, who are commonly viewed as traitors for abandoning Islam in favour of the faith associated with the Russian "enemy" in the region's decades-long guerrilla war.

A 2013 report written by Chatham House found that Islamic extremism in Central Asia and the Caucasus was increasing and likely to continue to do so, in part thanks to the disillusionment of some Muslims who felt victimised by the West and believed themselves to be subjected to a "grand conspiracy against the Muslim world".

Restrictions to religious freedom and freedom of expression in practice

Construction of Pentecostal church hits snag: Application for a liturgical building rejected in Perm

By Dmitry Vladimirov

Russia Religion News (19.02.2018) / Gulliver (13.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2Ca07EL> - On 12 February, the Commission for Land Use and Construction rejected an application of the religious organization of the Missionary Center of Christians of Evangelical Faith "Youth with a Mission" for granting permission in a Zh-2 zone (medium-story residential construction) for the use of "liturgical buildings and structures" on a parcel of 1,900 square meters at the address 6 Superfosfatnaia St. in Ordzhonikidze district.

Moreover this was not the first time this happened: in late December 2017 members of the commission responded coolly to the idea of any religious construction in the middle of a planned residential district, and the question was postponed. Now the commission completely refused to satisfy the application.

As was explained at the session, previously a "Friendship" children's club was located here and the evangelicals acquired the territory and the remaining dilapidated (this was especially noted at the session-ed.) building in 2007.

The general opinion at the session was that this organization is a "dark horse," which had not provided any clear explanations of what would be built there in the event of a positive decision.

The result was that a majority of members declared that they opposed an "exotic" use of the territory within a residential district.

The chairman of the commission, a deputy head of the city administration, Viktor Ageev, advised the applicant to first obtain the support of the local population, and if this happens then theoretically it would be possible to return to the question. (tr. by PDS, posted 15 February 2018)

Norwegian Jehovah's Witnesses try to prevent confiscation of house of worship

Russia Religion News (13.02.2018) / SOVA Center - <http://bit.ly/2ok8EM1> - On 13 February it became known that a Norwegian organization of Jehovah's Witnesses turned to the city court of Petrozavodsk. The "Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of the Kingdom of Norway" had acquired a building on Pervomaisk Prospect in 1998 and donated it in 2007 to Russian Jehovah's Witnesses, who transferred it to Finnish fellow believers in 2017.

The Norwegian organization insists that if the donation agreement of 2017 were to be ruled invalid, then the donation agreement of 1998 (sic-2007?) also should be found to be invalid, and that means that the Norwegian organization again becomes the owner of the building. The court admitted the "Watchtower Bible and Tract Society" of Norway to participation in the trial in the capacity of a third person. (tr. by PDS, posted 13 February 2018)

Prosecutions for anti-religious statements

Sova Center (13.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2EGqLH4> - In mid-January, the magistrate court in Sochi dismissed the criminal case against Viktor Nochevnov, previously convicted under Article 148 part 1 of the Criminal Code (insulting the feelings of believers) due to the statute of limitations. Nochevnov was sentenced to a fine of 50 thousand rubles in August 2017, but, in October, the district court annulled the verdict and sent the case for a new trial. The Sochi resident faced charges for sharing a series of cartoon images of Jesus Christ on a social network. We opposed the criminal prosecution against Nochevnov. In our opinion, the formula "insulting the feelings of believers", which has no legal meaning, should be removed from the Criminal Code altogether.

We learned in late January that, back in September 2017, musician Daniil Sukachyov of Novgorod was fined 30 thousand rubles under Article 5.26 part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (desecration of religious objects), and the district court confirmed the relevant decision of the magistrate in November. Sukachyov published on VKontakte a video set to the song of the Polish black metal band Batushka [Father], which used video of Orthodox worship, edited with addition of various superimposed effects (flames, smoke, etc.). We view the prosecution of the Novgorod resident as inappropriate - he did not create a video, but only posted it on the social network page; in addition, no actual religious objects were desecrated even in the process of creating the video.

82% of Russians consider unacceptable jokes about the Church

Interfax (19.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2FdVKXT> - Overwhelming majority of Russians (82%) believe it unacceptable to make jokes about the Church no matter what are the circumstances, the VTsIOM (the Russian Public Opinion Research Center) reports.

The poll showed that Russians also do not accept jokes about Russian history, the USSR, Russian Empire (70%), national peculiarities and traditions of various peoples (65%), Russian historical personalities who have passed away (64%), Russian military forces (62%).

Most part of respondents believe it acceptable to laugh at Russia's economic and social problems (53%) and acting authorities in general (54%).

The poll was held on February 9-10 among 2000 respondents.

Orthodox Christian Anti-Cult Activist Accused of Targeting, Harassing Leading Hindu Guru

By Cristina Maza

News Week (06.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2C1WJar> - Popular Hindu religious leader Shri Prakash Ji said his life in Russia drastically worsened during the past three years due to systematic harassment and threats from followers of an Orthodox Christian anti-cult activist.

Shri, who goes by the name Guru Ji, had been living peacefully in Russia since 1990, first as a medical student and then as a spiritual leader. He started a family in Russia and his three children, who are between the ages of 18 and 23, were all born in Moscow.

But three years ago, he caught the attention of anti-cult activist Alexander Dvorkin, a man human rights groups said harasses members of any religion that competes with Russia's Orthodox Church. Ever since, Guru Ji said he and his family have been the targets of a smear campaign that culminated in November, when police raided his spiritual center and his home.

"They searched the center, and they searched my home, where my family was. They are sending fake journalists to my office. People come to me, they pretend to be a follower, and then they film me. Every week they are doing something," Guru Ji told Newsweek.

"I'm starting to wonder how I can live here with my family. There are so many nationalist elements here, and my daughter is going to school, every day we are worried. They call and threaten us, they say I should leave Russia," he continued.

Guru Ji's lawyer, Kaloy Akhilgov, said Dvorkin's followers have filed false statements with the police saying that Guru Ji is guilty of economic crimes. So far, no charges have been pressed.

Guru Ji said that every day hundreds of people visit his spiritual center, which is located approximately 17 miles outside of Moscow. Yoga and meditation have experienced a cultural revival in Russia, just as they have in many parts of the West.

In Russia, Orthodox Christianity has fused with Russian nationalism under the watchful eye of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In this context, religious activists like Dvorkin have risen to positions of prominence. In 2009, the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom's annual report noted that Dvorkin had been named the chairman of a new government-linked body called the Expert Religious Studies Council, which was given wide powers to investigate religious organizations in Russia.

"The Expert Religious Studies Council's new chairman, Alexander Dvorkin, is Russia's most prominent anti-cult activist, and he lacks academic credentials as a religion specialist," the report notes. "Observers are concerned that under Dvorkin's leadership, the council may call for the closure of registered as well as unregistered minority religious communities."

The council maintains close ties to the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is also known for its anti-sect activities. Many in Russia say that Dvorkin and his associates have a long track record of targeting religious minorities and have a well-established network of followers and collaborators in governmental and nongovernmental structures throughout Russia.

"Religious freedom in Russia is in a dire state, and we're concerned about the status of all religious minorities there," Daniel Mark, chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Freedom, told Newsweek.

"Alexander Dvorkin is one of a large network of Russian Orthodox activists who have grown considerably in influence over the last 10 years due to the Russian government's increasing patronage of the Russian Orthodox Church and the government's Soviet-style concerns about the subversive potential of independent religious groups. These concerns are no justification for violations of religious freedom," Mark continued.

Dvorkin insists that Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Guru Ji are spreading false rumors about him. Dvorkin told Newsweek that he is now the deputy head of the council, whose only role is to advise the Ministry of Justice about which groups should be permitted to register as a religious organization. He denies persecuting religious minorities.

Over the past decade, however, the council has spearheaded campaigns against Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientologists in Russia. Last year, Russia opted to ban Jehovah's Witnesses altogether, a decision Dvorkin defended. Jehovah's Witnesses are now labeled an extremist group in Russia and are prohibited from gathering or preaching in the country.

In 2017, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Minorities recommended for the first time that Russia be included on the list of countries of particular concern. The State Department later declined to include Russia on the list.

"In mainland Russia in 2016, new laws effectively criminalized all private religious speech not sanctioned by the state, the Jehovah's Witnesses stand on the verge of a nationwide ban, and innocent Muslims were tried on fabricated charges of terrorism and extremism," the 2017 report stated.

Hare Krishnas in Russia have also been accused of being a "totalitarian sect." Plans in 2003 to build a Hindu temple for Hari Krishnas and members of the Vedic religions were derailed by members of the Orthodox Christian Church, who called Hinduism one of the most anti-Christian cults. According to the Indian embassy in Russia, there are around 14,000 Indian citizens living in Russia and around 1,500 Afghan nationals of Indian origin.

Now, Dvorkin's supporters have set their sights on Guru Ji. Dvorkin's blog, which is popular among conservative Orthodox Christians in Russia, claims that Guru Ji is not a real spiritual leader and that he tricks followers in order to take advantage of them and steal their money. The forum also contains testimony from people who claim that they once followed Guru Ji and experienced abuse. One user claimed Guru Ji is turning women against their husbands because his female followers are now only interested in men who are enlightened.

Guru Ji and members of his family said that the harassment has become intolerable as a result of the campaign. Experts contend that Dvorkin is not overtly dangerous, but that he and his followers have a habit of using law enforcement to fight their battles.

"Dvorkin is a very emotional person. In previous years, he could even turn violent in his anti-cultist fight. But he is not a fighter, in fact he was not really brutal," Alexander Verkhovsky, director of Russian think tank the SOVA Center, told Newsweek.

"Physical attacks by some of [his followers] is still possible but is very rare. They prefer writing books and articles, collaborating with police, Church leadership and other authorities," Verkhovsky continued. "So usually these people threaten not with violence but with urging [the] law enforcement system against their opponents."

Guru Ji and his son believe that this is exactly what happened when their spiritual center and home were raided one Thursday last November.

"My mother was alone inside the house. She called me and said there were people outside the door, so I came running home from college," Prasun Prakash, Guru Ji's 23-year-old son, told Newsweek.

"There were these six big guys, two were in uniform. I asked them for documents, they showed me a piece of paper, so we let them in," he continued.

The raid wasn't violent, Prasun said. The men, only two of whom wore police uniforms, looked through the house, opening drawers. But one of the police officers said something that Prasun thought was strange.

"He kept saying, 'This is a normal police raid, this is not Dvorkin,'" Prasun told Newsweek.

At the same time, a similar raid was taking place at Guru Ji's spiritual center.

"Policemen went to our cultural center, they wanted to find something criminal," said Kristina Shurygina, an employee at Guru Ji's spiritual center. Shurygina said that the policemen were generally friendly and polite. Russian media later reported that computers and documents were seized from the center due to suspicion of extremism.

The guru's lawyer said that he believes the police are trying to launch a criminal case with little evidence.

"Initially, there were attempts to initiate a criminal case on extremism, but [they] found nothing," Akhilgov told Newsweek, adding that there were no charges filed.

Guru Ji and his son Prasun decided to go to the local police to ask about the incident. They wanted to find out if the men who entered their home and spiritual center were authorized to do so.

But the police they encountered in the station weren't nearly as genial as the ones who conducted the raids. Prasun told Newsweek that a police officer entered the room where he and his father were waiting and began screaming at them, saying that they don't belong in Russia because they aren't Orthodox Christians.

"Then he pushed me out of the room, using physical force," Prasun said. "He said Russia is an Orthodox Christian country and foreign elements should be removed."

Guru Ji recorded the incident on his cell phone and posted the recording on his Facebook page. He said that he pledged never to return to the police station without a lawyer present.

Following the incident, he made video appeals to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin, accusing Dvorkin of harassing his family.

Dvorkin, however, insists that he has not encouraged anyone to go after Guru Ji.

"I am a professor, I don't have any followers," Dvorkin told Newsweek. "I didn't know about [Guru Ji] until three years ago when his former followers began writing on my forum and saying they had experienced abuse."

Instead, he said that groups like Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses and now Guru Ji have started a smear campaign against him.

"They've also said that I am a CIA agent and Mossad agent and KGB agent. But I'm the head of an NGO, Professor at the Orthodox University," he told Newsweek.

But the harassment of Guru Ji and his family has received attention both in Russia and in India. In January last year, some of Guru Ji's supporters in India staged a protest in front of the Russian embassy in Delhi.

Last June, Russian media reported that Guru Ji had traveled to India to meet with Vijay Kumar Singh, India's Minister of State for External Affairs. During the meeting, Singh said that Dvorkin should be investigated under international law for his harassment of Guru Ji.

Guru Ji also lodged a complaint with Russia's prosecutor general, a fact that was noted in Russian media. Valery Rashkin, a deputy of Russia's Communist Party in the Russian Duma, took up Guru Ji's cause and called for an inquiry, saying that Dvorkin's activities jeopardized Russia's relationship with India.

A roundtable on the issue was held in the Duma in December, when Guru Ji was invited to give a press conference.

Despite the attention, Guru Ji and his son Prasun do not believe that Dvorkin and his followers will stop harassing them. While they plan to continue to raise awareness about Dvorkin's persecution of religious minorities, they raised concerns that the system is rigged against them.

"If you have the will then you can change anything. This is what keeps me, my father, my family and our well-wishers going," Prasun said. "Otherwise we wouldn't have decided to fight this war for justice against the whole system."

Russian government service fumbles attempt to punish news agency

[Portal-Credo.ru \(25.01.2018\)](http://Portal-Credo.ru) - The "Agency of Business News" (abnews.ru) on 25 January reported that it received from Roskomnadzor [Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media] a notification about the detection of a violation of legislation on news media, for which administrative accountability is provided by part 2 of article 13.15 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law (distribution of information about an organization that is included in the list of extremists, within indication that its activity has been prohibited). Consideration of the case in the service is scheduled for 8 February, ABN reports.

An article of 17 July 2017 by the Agency of Business News, to which Roskomnadzor called attention, was devoted to the refusal by the appellate college of the Russian Supreme Court to overturn the decision finding the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and 395 structural subdivisions to be extremist and liquidating them. The headline of the news article spoke about the "liquidation of Jehovah's Witnesses" and the text, about "removal of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization," although the wording "organization forbidden on the territory of Russia" was not included in a note.

However, in the document itself that was sent to the editorial office by Roskomnadzor reference is mistakenly made to a decision of the Supreme Court about a ban of "Right Sector," instead of the decision banning the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

"The accusation by Roskomnadzor against the Agency of Business News is incorrect. Administrative accountability is provided exclusively for failure to mention the ban of organizations that are included in the list of extremists, and the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses was added to it only [later?]," the SOVA Center for News and Analysis commented about the situation. (tr. by PDS, posted 26 January 2018)

Student barred from exams at Moscow State University for wearing a Jewish hat

Pravda Report (23.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2FcVaIS> - A professor of Moscow State University named after Lomonosov refused to take an exam from a student who was wearing a kippah. The student filed a complaint at the university administration.

Professor Vyacheslav Baburin, the head of the Department of Economic and Social Geography of Russia, the Geography Department of Moscow State University, offered the young man either to remove his headdress or leave the auditorium. The student, named as Lev Boroda, had to look for another teacher, who would be willing to take the exam. The administrative office helped the student find a more tolerant professor.

The student filed a complaint against Baburin at the rector's office. According to the student, he has come across manifestations of religious intolerance at the university before. When he asked to be released from physical education classes during Yom Kippur

- the Day of Atonement, when Jews practice strict fasting - another teacher advised him to "go get baptised."

The head of the Geography Department of the Moscow State University, Sergei Dobrolyubov, explained the student's non-admission to exams. "There are no complaints against Professor Baburin, he had the right to do as he did. I have talked to him and he pointed out the rules of the internal order of Lomonosov Moscow State University, signed in 2008," Dobrolyubov said.

In accordance with those rules, it is forbidden to stay at university premises in outer clothing and headdresses.

Kippah is a traditional Jewish male headdress, which looks like a small cap. Orthodox Jews wear the kippah at all times.

Unregistered Baptists caught in violation of Varovaya Package

OVDInfo (23.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2Bq1tGK> - A judge of the Tigil district court in the village of Palana, Yulia Belova, fined two adherents of the teaching of the religious organization of the "International Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists," Vladimir Dordzhiev and Anatoly Tynetegin, 20 and 10 thousand rubles respectively for street preaching. This was reported on the website of the court.

The men were found guilty of violating part 2 of article 20.2 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law (organizing an unsanctioned public event). Judge Belova reduced Tynetegin's fine because of mitigating circumstances-he has nine minor children.

On 19 November 2017, Dordzhiev and Tynetegin conducted a public worship service near a building of a state enterprise, during which they described for passers-by their teaching and distributed leaflets. Later police officers approached the men and arrested them and took them to the Koryak police department.

On 22 October 2014, changes were introduced into article 16 of the law "On freedom of conscience and religious associations, after which it became obligatory to get permission for religious events if they were not being conducted on the territory of religious organizations or outside of houses of worship. (tr. by PDS, posted 23 January 2018)

Baptism madness seizes Russians on Epiphany



HRWF (23.01.2018) - This picture is symbolic of the relations between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church: both are narrowly united to strengthen their mutual power. This picture perfectly illustrates the concept of "spiritual security" put in place in 2000 which consists in identifying the Russian people with Orthodoxy and rejecting any religious groups and non-religious organizations with foreign roots. The invisible spiritual security concept is the new Iron Wall built by Russia against the Western World and its values. It is more efficient than the Wall made of bricks and concrete during the Cold War because it is being built in and with the minds of the people in Russia. It leads to cultural and religious isolationism, to the banning of 'undesirable' 'foreign' groups (Jehovah's Witnesses and other peaceful religious groups) and to religious and ideological cleansing with the final objective of purifying the Orthodox lands.

Putin visits St Nil Hermitage where at night he swam in Lake Seliger

Portal-Credo.ru, 19 January 2018 - On 19 January the Orthodox Church celebrates one of the twelve chief feast days-the Baptism of the Lord, or Epiphany. According to a tradition that has been established in recent years in the Russian federation, on this day Russians participate in mass Baptism bathing.

On the night from 18 to 19 January, Russian President Vladimir Putin also bathed in a Baptism ice hole. He visited the hermitage of the male monastery of St. Nil of Stolobnoe, which belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow patriarchate, and he plunged into Lake Seliger, Rosblat reports on 19 January.

His press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, reported that for Putin this was "not the first experience of Baptism bathing." "In the course of a number of years the president has already plunged into an ice hole." Peskov added that this year the traditional Baptism freeze has not occurred in central Russia and therefore "the temperature in the region of the lake on this night did not go below 6 or 7 degrees below zero [Celsius]."

Social networks were not slow in reacting to this event. A Rosbalt correspondent writes that opinions varied: from "Muzhik [Mensch]," "Krasava [Bravo]," and "where else is

there such a president, I am proud!" to "they heated the water in the lake with an atomic heater." (tr. by PDS, posted 19 January 2018)

Around 1.8 million participate in baptism bathing in Russia

[Interfax-Religiia, 19 January 2018](#) - Almost two million persons participated in mass bathing and services for the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord and their safety was guaranteed by more than 30,000 troops of police, an official representative of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs [M.V.D.], Irina Volk, reported.

"In the night from 18 to 19 January, more than 7,300 festive worship services and mass bathings occurred in the Russian federation, which were devoted to the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, in which around 1.8 million persons participated," I. Volk said.

She said that the securing of public order on territories near Orthodox churches and specially equipped fonts was provided by about 34,000 police personnel. In addition, around 2,500 troops of the Russian Guard were activated and also more than 11,000 representatives of national guards, cossacks, and private security enterprises.

"The security of religious events was ensured to the fullest. No violations of public order were reported," I. Volk emphasized. (tr. by PDS, posted 19 January 2018)

More than 104,000 swim in ice holes on baptism in Moscow

[RIA Novosti, 19 January 2018](#) - More than 104,000 persons have already plunged into ice holes during Baptism bathing on the territory of Moscow, and no incidents have occurred, a representative of the press service of the capital headquarters of the Ministry of Emergencies told RIA Novosti.

"As of 12:00 [noon], places for conduct of the ritual of Baptism bathing were visited by more than 166,000 persons, of whom more than 104,000 bathed," the news agency's source said.

He said that no incidents occurred during the time of Baptism bathing in Moscow.

"In the course of patrolling bodies of water along with agencies of internal affairs, five unsanctioned places of bathing were discovered and measures were taken to prevent access to them by citizens," the representative of the ministry added.

Approximately 1,300 personnel of fire and rescue agencies of the capital were involved in measures for guaranteeing the safety of people in places of Baptism bathing along with 335 technical units, including 16 hydrofoils. (tr. by PDS, posted 19 January 2018)

Patriarch Kirill thinks that the feast of baptism opens captivating perspective before believers

[Interfax-Religiia, 19 January 2018](#) - Patriarch of Moscow and all-Rus Kirill noted that the feast of Baptism opens special perspectives before Christians.

"The present day, which constitutes an integral part of the day of the Nativity of Christ, opens before us an especially captivating spiritual perspective: we know that we are not alone in the face of grief and difficult circumstances and we know that God is with us," he said on Friday after the liturgy in the Epiphany cathedral of Moscow.

The patriarch recalled that it is no accident that in the Great Compline on the eve of the feasts of Nativity and Baptism these words are solemnly intoned: "God is with us!"

The primate is sure that "the epiphany of the Lord in the flesh for the salvation of humankind is the turning point in all of human history."

"And you and I are heirs of all that the Lord accomplished and it is only required of us never to forsake him and never to permit that distrust would paralyze our thinking and our feelings and our will so that our prayer will always be sincere and heartfelt, and then the grace of God appearing in the Savior's coming into the world will accompany us on all paths of our life," he concluded. (tr. by PDS, posted 19 January 2018)

Orthodox celebrate baptism of the Lord

[Interfax-Religiia, 19 January 2018](#) - On Friday, Orthodox believers are celebrating one of the most ancient of Christian holidays, the Baptism of the Lord or Epiphany.

On this day Christians commemorate the baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River with which his ministry for humanity began. The word "I baptize" literally in translation from the Greek means "I plunge into water." Christ was baptized by the prophet John, who immediately recognized in him the Savior who was awaited by the Hebrew people.

The first mentions of the feast day date to the early third century; to be sure at the time it was celebrated along with Christmas and the two celebrations were separated only toward the end of the fourth century, although even now in some ancient churches these holidays are marked on the same day.

The eve precedes Baptism when believers prepare themselves by prayer and fasting for the upcoming celebration. Christians believe that in the night the water in all bodies of water on earth becomes holy and acquires miraculous healing properties.

In Russia, despite the traditional freezes, on this day baptismal bathing is conducted in specially equipped fonts, called "Jordans." Believers come to bodies of water and plunge themselves into the icy water, believing that thereby they will be able to be healed from spiritual and bodily diseases. This year the Ministry of Emergencies expects that about 1.5 million people will participate in Baptism bathing.

At the same time, representatives of the church remind them that immersion in the baptismal font is a pious ritual which should not be turned into showy action and that, when plunging into the water, it is necessary to seek not external health but inner and spiritual health.

The great consecration of the water is also performed on this day in Orthodox churches. By tradition, Patriarch Kirill performs the festive liturgy today and consecration of the water in the Epiphany cathedral church in Moscow.

According to ancient tradition, on the feast of Baptism it is customary to consecrate water not only in churches but also in open bodies of water. Priests of the Russian Orthodox Church will consecrate today all four oceans of earth in various parts of the world. (tr. by PDS, posted 20 January 2018)