

RUSSIA: Six more Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to years in prison

– HRWF (19.09.2019) – Six Jehovah's Witnesses from Saratov have been convicted and sentenced to prison for their peaceful Christian worship.

Judge Dmitry Larin of the Leninsky District Court of Saratov sentenced Konstantin Bazhenov and Alexei Budenchuk to 3 years and 6 months in prison; Felix Makhammadiev to 3 years; Roman Gridasov, Gennady German, and Alexei Miretsky to 2 years. Additionally, all of the men have been banned from holding leadership positions in public organizations for a period of 5 years and restriction of freedom for 1 year. All have been charged under Part 1 of Art. 282 of Russian Criminal Code (organization of activities of an extremist organization). The defendants were taken into custody in the courtroom and will be sent to jail. The defense intends to appeal the verdict.

The whole logic of the accusation was based on the speculative thesis that faith in God is "a continuation of the activities of an extremist organization." As a consequence of this approach, instead of searching and proving the guilt of the defendants, the aim of the investigation was to prove their religious affiliation, despite the fact that no religion is prohibited in Russia. Having proved the religion of the defendants, which they did not hide, the court automatically interpreted this fact as the activity of a prohibited legal entity.

Criminal cases were initiated against all six men as a result of home raids conducted in Saratov on June 12, 2018. Three of the men, Konstantin Bazhenov, Alexey Budenchuk, and Felix Makhammadiev spent almost a year in pretrial detention. All five of the men have families and have been productive members of their community. Alexei Budenchuk has two children who are still in school.

In their final words, the six men quoted from the Bible, thanked the court and law enforcement agencies, and said that they did not harbor animosity toward the persecutors.

Including today's verdict, Russia has now convicted and sentenced to prison seven men.

[Link](#) to images and short biographies for all of the men. You're welcome to use the images, but we ask that you please include the following credit line: "Courtesy of Jehovah's Witnesses."

As of Sept 19

251 JWs were facing criminal charges

41 were in detention (pretrial or prison)

23 were under house arrest

Over 100 were under restrictions

Source: JW headquarters in the US

Moscow's religious persecution in Crimea

Today, at the OSCE/ ODIHR Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, the Crimean Human Rights Group stressed that 36 Muslims had been deprived of their freedom on alleged charges of terrorism and extremism although they had never used or advocated violence.

The Crimean Human Rights Group also stressed that three mass searches had been organized in November 2018 among Jehovah's Witnesses and four of them had been accused of extremism.

This summer, a group of Hare Krishna devotees (Hindus) met in the forest in Sevastopol to sing religious songs. This was reported to the Russian police anti-extremism unit. In August, two of them were fined 5,000 rubles for 'unlawful missionary activities'. The 'evidence' was a video posted by Hare Krishna devotees on social media. However, it is clear on the video that there no other people than themselves and were unable to preach to anyone

RUSSIA: Dvorkin, FECRIS vice-president, attacks Hinduism

and Hindu Master Prakas Ji

– Alexander Dvorkin, a notorious anti-cult activist in Russia and vice-president of the France-based anti-cult umbrella organization FECRIS, will demonstrate this week in Moscow to ask for the deportation back to India of Sri Prakash, a respected Indian master who has been living in Russia for 29 years.

– Dr Massimo Introvigne, the managing director of CESNUR (Centre for Studies on New Religious Movements), visited their ashram in Vilnius, read their books, and found them a typical Hindu movement unfairly harassed by Dvorkin.

– Under the following statement titled “Another Minority Religion Under Threat in Russia: Who Is Afraid of Sri Prakash?”, a dozen organizations have already put their signature to protest Dvorkin’s repeated hate speech targeting this religion but more support is expected.

“The situation of religious minorities in Russia has been a cause of serious concerns for several years. While Russia hosts high-level academic institutes and tolerant intellectuals, it is also home to radicals who believe that the Russian Orthodox tradition should be defended by cracking down on minority religions.

Notorious in this respect has been, again for years, one Alexander Dvorkin, who heads an “anti-cult” center in Moscow and co-operates with international anti-cultists under the aegis of an organization known as FECRIS. Although rarely taken seriously abroad, Mr. Dvorkin has shown that he can be a real danger for religious minorities in Russia, unleashing against them friends in the media and in otherwise respectable institutions.

One of the obsessions of Mr. Dvorkin is Hinduism. He never really recovered from the international ridicule that targeted

him in 2012 after he supported a ban against the ISKCON edition of the *Bhagavad Gita* as an “extremist book.” He believes that, through meditation and ritual, Hindu masters can “hypnotize” or “brainwash” unsuspecting Christian followers and turn them into Hindus overnight. Scholars of religion and Western courts of law have dismissed brainwashing theories as pseudoscience long ago.

A main target of Mr Dvorkin is the Hindu master Sri Prakash Ji, who has been living in Russia since 1990 and has a sizable Russian following, as well as disciples in several other countries. What particularly upsets Mr. Dvorkin is that Sri Prakash dared challenging his anti-cult center in a Russian court, obtaining on December 10, 2018 a declaration that some statements were indeed defamatory. Even more unacceptable in Mr. Dvorkin’s eyes are Sri Prakash’s projects for building a Hindu temple in Moscow.

Mr. Dvorkin has now started again a media campaign against Sri Prakash and his alleged “hypnotic” practices, calling for his deportation from Russia, a country where he and his family have been peacefully living for 29 years.

We fully understand that Mr. Dvorkin’s activities do not represent or express the voice of the majority of the Russian people and of the faithful members of the Russian Orthodox Church. They know that their tradition and identity are not well served by bigoted anti-minorities, anti-Hindu and anti-Indian attitudes. It is for this reason that the most respected Russian institutions should urgently clarify that they are not on the same side of Mr. Dvorkin on the Sri Prakash issue.”

July 23, 2019

CAP-LC Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience

CESNUR – Center for Studies on New Religions

EIFRF European Inter-Religious Forum for Religious Freedom

Fedinsieme

FOB – European Federation for Freedom of Belief

FOREF – Forum for Religious Freedom Europe

HRWF – Human Rights Without Frontiers

LIREC – Center for Studies on Freedom of Belief, Religion and Conscience

ORLIR – International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees

Osservatorio sul Pluralismo Religioso

Soteria International

Asociación por la Defensa de la Tolerancia y los Derechos Humanos