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## **LATVIA: Latvia threatens to “liquidate” the Jehovah’s Witnesses**

**Latvia, following Russia, threatens to “liquidate” the Jehovah’s Witnesses**

*Unbelievably, 24 hours after a news media portal attacked the JW’s, the General Prosecutor’s Office announced proceedings aimed at a possible Russian-style “termination.”*

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (02.04.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3r7FwxI> – In these days, all democratic countries are busy emphasizing how different they are from Russia. All narratives about the present crisis are about moral values, not international treaties only. It is an appropriate historical moment, particularly for countries in the European Union, to reflect on how precious, and at the same time fragile, are the values of democracy and human rights. Religious liberty is a key human right. The attitude of Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), who supported the war with theological motivations, as well as the denial of religious freedom in the pseudo-republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, have been widely mentioned as alarm bells alerting the rest of the world to the dangers of the Russian notion of “spiritual security,” which denies the right to freely operate and proselytize to all religions other than the ROC.

NGOs specialized in religious liberty have quoted the case of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, “liquidated” in Russia in 2017, as the clearest example of Russia’s open challenge to the European Convention on Human Rights and its principle of freedom of religion or belief. On December 17, 2021, some two months before the war in Ukraine, the U.S. Department of State released a strong-worded statement against “the increased repression of Jehovah’s Witnesses in a number of countries.” It was co-signed with the United States by another eleven countries, including European Union member states Denmark, the Netherlands, Greece, Poland, Slovakia, Latvia, and Lithuania, plus Ukraine, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Brazil. The signature of Ukraine, Latvia and Lithuania, countries with vivid memories of Soviet oppression and denial of religious liberty, was not surprising.

It would seem that this is the worst possible moment for any democratic country, and perhaps the more so for Eastern European countries under direct Russian threat, to imitate

Russia and threaten to “liquidate” minority religious organizations, particularly the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Yet, as unbelievable as it might appear, on March 30, 2022, in the middle of the war in Ukraine, the General Prosecutor’s Office of Latvia issued a press release announcing that there may be “grounds to conclude that the activities of the religious organization ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses’ may be in conflict with the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia and other regulatory enactments, its activities may endanger public order, health and morals.” Accordingly, on March 30, 2022, a “resolution of the Acting Prosecutor General” launched an investigation “to verify the compliance of the Jehovah’s Witnesses with the requirements of the law.” Even before starting such an investigation, the press release warned that religious organizations that violate the Constitution of Latvia will be “terminated,” or liquidated.

As justification for this exceptional announcement, the General Prosecutor’s Office mentioned that on March 28 and 29, 2022, the news portal TVNET had published emotionally tainted stories of “apostates” who had left the organization of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Academics have come to recognize the apostates’ “atrocious stories” as a distinctive literary genre of religious controversy, and have warned against the credibility that can be given to these accounts.

And yes, the dates are correct. On March 28 and 29, TVNET published the “atrocious stories” of the apostates and on March 30 a resolution of the General Prosecutor’s Office ordered the investigation. Normally, even when murder or gross political corruption are denounced by sensational news media articles, the authorities take some time to investigate, certainly more than 24 hours. One possible explanation is that justice in Latvia is lightning fast, a model for the rest of the world, and that it was enough for the Acting Prosecutor General to quickly read two media articles to blindly believe their allegations and take immediate action. Another explanation is

that the TVNET publication was coordinated with the General Prosecutor's Office, and the articles and the official resolution were two parts of a mechanism built beforehand to frame the Jehovah's Witnesses.

What is even more striking in the incident is that what happened in Latvia is a textbook example of actions denounced in a report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) as part of a typical Russian authoritarian mechanism, something democratic countries are supposed to denounce and certainly not to imitate. The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Its Commissioners are appointed by the President and by Congressional leaders of both political parties.

According to the USCIRF report, first, sensational accounts are published in the media (often based on stories, real or otherwise, by apostate ex-members) aimed at persuading the population that certain religious minorities are sinister "totalitarian cults" (the Russian word used is "секта," "sekta," but this and similar words should be translated as "cult," as I have explained elsewhere). When the public opinion has been sufficiently manipulated, the authorities, which in most cases had instigated the campaign in the first place, state that they have heard the requests of the population and will now enact laws against the "totalitarian cults." The Russian authorities, after such a campaign, stated, as the USCIRF report summarized, that "'totalitarian sects [cults]' were 'growing like mushrooms,' and 'present[ed] a distinct threat to society' that needed to be addressed by legal mechanisms." The Russian politician who made this announcement was Vladimir Putin himself.

The ultrarapid sequence of articles by TVNET, published both in Latvian and in Russian, and the resolution and press release by the General Prosecutor's Office repeated exactly Putin's model. The first article declared in its very first

paragraph that the Jehovah's Witnesses are a "totalitarian cult" (which, by the way, is a concept invented by Russian anti-cultists and unknown to international scholarly literature) and that TVNET will publish "a series of articles" proving this statement, giving voice to "former Jehovah's Witnesses" and "experts." By "experts" TVNET means anti-cultists, not scholars, and by "former members" it means "apostates." As a series of articles in Bitter Winter demonstrated, "apostate" and "former member" are not synonymous. Only a small minority of those who leave a religious organization become "apostates," i.e., militant opponents of the religions they have left. The apostate accounts are obviously biased, and certainly cannot be the only or the main source of information about a religion.

The first article is about a vocal Latvian apostate called Jānis Folkmanis. He compares the Jehovah's Witnesses to the Soviets and the Nazis, and argues that the Jehovah's Witnesses practice mental manipulation, a criticism that seems to be based on the pseudo-scientific and discredited notion of "brainwashing," dismissed also in a recent judgment issued by the European Court of Human Rights in a case involving Jehovah's Witnesses, and "love bombing," a practice once used by missionaries of the Unification Church, a Korean new religious movement, to make the potential converts feel loved and accepted by the group. Anti-cultists routinely use the expression to criticize all "cults."

Folkmanis mentions, with an approving attitude, that "in Russia the Jehovah's Witnesses are recognized as an extremist organization and their activities are banned," and uses the Russian standard argument that the Jehovah's Witnesses are "extremist" because they believe that theirs is "the only true religion." That a myriad of texts by other religions, including the Russian Orthodox Church, proclaims very much the same with respect to their own religion seems to be something Folkmanis is not aware of. Apart from the usual laundry list

of accusations that are common in anti-cult literature, Folkmanis insists that the Jehovah's Witnesses collect huge resources and are "essentially a transnational financial corporation." This appears strange, if one considers the financial mechanisms granting much larger financial resources to the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia and to other Christian churches in several European Union countries.

The argument Folkmanis uses to specially impress the readers, and perhaps the General Prosecutor, is that the Jehovah's Witnesses hide, rather than reporting, cases of pedophilia and sexual abuse, a claim repeated in the second article by two female apostates, one of whom also vaguely mentions ostracism of disfellowshipped ex-members, and the fact that teachings about eschatology and the end of the world create a psychologically dangerous state of anger among the Jehovah's Witnesses. Scholars of millenarianism disagree, and have noted that often members of religions whose teachings have an emphasis on eschatology are motivated to live moral lives and work for the common good. At any rate, the eschatological interests are hardly unique to the Jehovah's Witnesses: in 2020, 29% of the U.S. adults regarded it as likely that apocalyptic disasters will come during their lifetime.

Concerning sexual abuse, all three apostates candidly admit that most of their information comes from the Internet, where of course they have only consulted articles and sources hostile to the Jehovah's Witnesses. Only Folkmanis mentions a case he claims to have personally witnessed, dating back to decades ago, where a woman who accused in a letter her brother of having sexually abused her was allegedly counseled not to inform the authorities. Of course, we have only Folkmanis' word for this, and I wouldn't be surprised if this case, once properly investigated, would turn out to be completely baseless, as it happened in other similar cases concerning Jehovah's Witnesses in several countries.

Bitter Winter published a series of articles on the issue of

sexual abuse among the Jehovah's Witnesses, which also examined the report of the Australian Royal Commission, which all the apostates interviewed by TVNET quote. Professor Holly Folk discussed the shortcomings of this report in one of our articles.

However, here again, the Latvian apostates have probably not even read the Royal Commission report, and rely on some journalistic accounts or news published in anti-Witnesses websites. Had they read the voluminous report, they would have discovered that, while we maintain that it relied on a doubtful methodology, it applied it to religion in general, not to Jehovah's Witnesses only. If one takes the results of the Royal Commission at face value, the Jehovah's Witnesses had some problems of sexual abuse not reported to the authorities, but not more, and in fact less, than the Roman Catholic Church and other mainline Christian denominations. Surely the General Prosecutor's Office does not plan to recommend the "liquidation" of the Catholic Church in Latvia, yet all reports on the issue throughout the world evidence it has a problem of unreported sexual abuse more serious than the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Another typical, and malicious, confusion is to discuss cases of decades ago as if they had happened today. Not only laws on mandatory reporting of sexual abuse changed in many countries, but the general awareness of the problem was not the same, both in society in general and in religious bodies. As, happily, societies and religions became more aware of the tragedy of sexual abuse, laws evolved, and religious organizations also improved their procedures for monitoring and intervening. As the Catholic Church and other religions also did, the Jehovah's Witnesses have constantly fine-tuned their procedures for preventing and confronting sexual abuse. While unfortunately no measures can eliminate all the cases, the Jehovah's Witnesses are not less effective than other religious organizations when it comes to their anti-abuse

practices.

Sexual abuse, particularly of minors, is a horrific plague, but is not a unique problem of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Unfortunately, in the accounts of the Latvian apostates, a very serious societal problem is reduced to a pretext to single out a specific religious organization they try to destroy.

This is how things worked in Russia, up to the liquidation of the Jehovah's Witnesses and to the arrest and torture of their members. We expect democratic countries such as Latvia, which have experienced Soviet oppression and denial of religious freedom for decades, to do better. After all, Latvia co-signed a statement noting that the Jehovah's Witnesses are "falsely designated as 'extremist,'" and promising to "uphold the right of Jehovah's Witnesses to practice their religion and their beliefs (...) without fear, harassment, discrimination, or persecution." Can somebody in Latvia please explain to the international community why the General Prosecutor's Office of Latvia decided to believe Russian propaganda and two sensational media articles rather than statements signed by its own government?

*Photo : Jehovah's Witnesses demonstrating how to use the jw.org website in Riga, Latvia. Source: jw.org.*

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**Massimo Introvigne** (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of*



*Research on Religion and of the executive board of University of California Press' Nova Religio. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.*

**Further reading about FORB in Latvia on HRWF website**

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