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Opposition to Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia: Legal measures

Vilnius University seminar

Jehovah's Witnesses and Their Opponents: Russia, the West, and Beyond

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HRWF (03.09.2020) – As of 15 August, 44 Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison in Russia: 10 had been convicted and 34 were in pretrial detention. Additionally, 173 Jehovah's Witnesses were under orders forbidding them from leaving their hometown and 379 were under criminal investigation. These individuals ranged in age from 19 to 90 years old.

Why are so many Jehovah's Witnesses being put behind bars in Russia? Worldwide, they are known to be law abiding citizens and to be non-violent. They may be imprisoned as conscientious objectors to military service or for their proselytizing activities in some countries, but this is not the case in Russia.

In Russia, they are accused of being **extremists**. Since April 2017, when the movement was banned by the Supreme Court, 1107 of their homes have been raided, including 310 in 2020. These raids have continued even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dennis Christensen, a 46-year-old **Danish citizen** living in the Russian town of Oryol, was the **first Jehovah's Witness to be arrested** a few weeks after the ban. He was placed in pre-trial detention for a long period before being sentenced to **six years in prison**.

The acceleration and intensification of the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia started with **the ban of their movement on 20 April 2017 on grounds of alleged extremism**.

The ban on grounds of extremism

On that day, Russia's Supreme Court ruled that **the Jehovah's Witnesses' national headquarters in St Petersburg and all local branches were "extremist", and thus should be closed and immediately stop all activities. Additionally, the Supreme Court ordered all of their property to be seized by the state.**

The Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre appealed the decision but, on 17 July 2017, Russia's Supreme Court upheld its earlier ruling **to liquidate the Administrative Centre and its 395 local legal entities, as well as to ban all activities and seize all properties.** It is estimated that these properties are worth **over 125 million USD.**

The ruling immediately entered into force but although it did not, **in theory,** suppress the freedom of worship of Jehovah's Witnesses, their religious activities carried out either individually or collectively were afterwards labelled **'extremist' and criminalised in practice.** The arrest and lengthy prison sentencing of Dennis Christensen was a strong warning to Jehovah's Witnesses and the international human rights community: **the law would be strictly and firmly implemented.**

Dennis Christensen, six years in prison

After nearly a year-long criminal trial with over **50 court appearances,** Dennis Christensen was sentenced to **six years' imprisonment for allegedly "organizing extremist activities of a banned organization".** The Oryol community of Dennis Christensen was specifically targeted because the Oryol

Regional Court had previously ruled their group to be **“extremist”**.

On 23 June 2020, Christensen was granted parole after serving half of his prison sentence. However, the Kursk Regional Public Prosecutor’s Office blocked his release request. The prison authorities then placed Christensen in a punishment cell for ten days for alleged minor violations of prison rules despite his poor health. **He is still in prison right now.**

The accusations of extremism

The accusations of extremism against Jehovah’s Witnesses are not new.

According to statistics from Russia’s Justice Ministry, during the period 2007-2017 local courts had banned **at least eight Jehovah’s Witnesses organizations** on the basis of the 2002 law against extremism, as well as **95 pieces of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ literature**. In most cases where publications were deemed extremist, the justification was that this literature allegedly claimed their interpretation of the Bible was superior to other Christian religions. This was considered a sign of extremism.

Extremism without violence

A turning point in Russia’s anti-extremism strategy was when **an amendment was passed in 2006 that removed the necessity for**

violators of the law to be associated with violence or calls to violence.

This amendment to the anti-extremism law opened the door to arbitrary and unrestrained interpretations of the concept of extremism. It has led to the criminalisation of freedom of thought, expression, worship, and assembly, as well as to police raids, fabricated charges, arrests and sentencing of members of peaceful groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses.

The emergence of the concept of 'spiritual security'

The persecution of non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin, or without **"historical" roots** in Russia, is based on the political philosophy of **"spiritual security"**. This concept is promoted by the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church with the support of far-right nationalist, xenophobic and anti-American movements.

In his 2000 National Security Concept, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that "protection of the cultural, spiritual and moral legacy, historical traditions and the norms of social life" was a matter of national security. He also argued for "a state policy to maintain the population's spiritual and moral welfare, and to counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries".

The developments that ensued soon stifled the principles of liberalism established in the very first years of the post-Soviet period.

The progressive 1990 Law on Freedom of Worship adopted by Russia under President Mikhail Gorbachev attracted large numbers of American and European Protestant missionaries who believed that the former Soviet Union would be a vast new territory for missionary work. This development raised the wrath of the Russian Orthodox Church.

A new law was necessary to end the perceived “invasion” by Protestant and other American “cults” who were portrayed by the Russian Orthodox Church as threatening the national identity. To this end, the Orthodox Church and the anti-cult movement led by **Alexander Dvorkin** intensely lobbied the Russian Parliament. They mobilised conservative segments of society to replace the liberal 1990 law with a new one aligning with their agenda. They won this first legal battle when President Boris Yeltsin passed the **1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which differentiated between traditional and non-traditional religions in Russia.**

Since then, the concept of “spiritual security” as part of national security has been developed and instrumentalised by the ruling authorities and the judiciary to restrict the rights of non-Orthodox religious minorities of foreign origin and to criminalise their beliefs, teachings, religious publications and peaceful activities .

The spiritual security concept and the scapegoating of “foreign agents”

However, the notion of “spiritual security” is part of a much

broader security context in Russia.

On 20 July 2012, Putin signed a bill into law that required independent groups to register as **“foreign agents”** if they received any foreign funding and engaged in “political activity”.

Consequently, Russian NGOs and Russia-based NGOs that received funding from the European Union (EU), the United States (US), and American or European foundations were infamously labelled “foreign agents” by Moscow. This law was justified by the assertion that so-called “foreign agents” are a threat to the Russian identity, national Orthodox values, social and religious cohesion and national security.

The label “foreign agent” breathed new life into the old Soviet accusation of espionage that still finds hold in the minds of the older Russian generation and acts as **a synonym for “spy” or “traitor”**.

In this context of ‘foreign agent’ hunting, Jehovah’s Witnesses, a movement coming from the United States and having its headquarters in that country, became a priority target as they spread on historically canonical Slavic lands with a theology challenging the message of the Orthodox Church.

In the meantime, the amended anti-extremism laws had been purged from its fundamental element of violence and could be used against them.

The Russian Orthodox Church united with the Kremlin against Jehovah's Witnesses

In all of the Russian Orthodox Church's press releases concerning the 2017 ban and subsequent arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses, the egregious violations of religious freedom or misuse of the anti-extremism legislation has **never been raised as such**. In fact, it's been the opposite, with the Church publicly announcing its support of the ban.

On 20 April 2017, Interfax-Religion titled a press release: "Russian Supreme Court declares Russian branch of Jehovah's Witnesses extremist organization, orders its closure".

On 2 May 2017, Interfax-Religion confirmed the position of the Church with a press release titled: "Russian Orthodox Church supports ban on Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia".

On 13 February 2019, the Russian Orthodox Church reiterated its full support for the ban with a press release titled: "Russian courts' ban on Jehovah's Witnesses founded – Justice Ministry".

The destructive role of Alexander Dvorkin and his anti-cult organisations

The banning of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia was a great

victory for Orthodox anti-cult organisations and, in particular, **Alexander Dvorkin** who is the main and emblematic **anti-cult crusader** in Russia.

After returning in the early 1990s to Russia from the US where he was influenced by the American anti-cult movement, Dvorkin has been fighting against Jehovah's Witnesses for over two decades. His stance aligns with Orthodox values dear to Patriarch Kirill and the spiritual security concept dear to President Putin. Dvorkin was outspoken about this perceived victory in RIA Novosti news and on the TV Channel Sputnik a few weeks after the decision.

Conclusions

The fight for religious freedom in Russia has a long way to go. The US is leading the way by exposing President Putin's persecution agenda against Jehovah's Witnesses and other so-called "non-historical" religious movements. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has made a number of recommendations to the US government calling for **sanctions that include the Russian anti-cult movement and their mentor, Alexander Dvorkin, but also the FECRIS international anti-cult movement he has been the vice-president of for years.**

The EU has its own system of targeted sanctions that could be activated. The United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy and other democratic countries have mechanisms designed to defend freedom of religion or belief around the world and to adopt sanctions, if necessary.

Lastly, Jehovah's Witnesses themselves defend the right to freedom of religion for their members in Russian courts, at the European Court of Human Rights, the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. This movement survived Nazi ideology. It survived 70 years of Communism in Russia. It is safe to assume that it will also survive the persecution of Putin's regime **backed by the Russian Orthodox Church and Dvorkin**, but it will be a long battle.

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