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CRIMEA: Long sentences against three Ukrainian Jehovah's Witnesses

RUSSIA : 'Court' in Russian-occupied Crimea passes long sentences against three Ukrainian Jehovah's Witnesses

By Halya Coynash

KHPJ (03.03.2023) – The Russian occupation ‘Yalta municipal court’ has convicted four Jehovah’s Witnesses of preposterous charges based solely on the Ukrainians’ faith, with three men sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. Instead of complying with international law which prohibits an occupying state from applying its legislation on occupied territory, Russia’s religious persecution in occupied Crimea is worse even than that on Russian territory. If in Russia, ‘judges’ do fairly often pass suspended sentences, virtually all ‘trials’ in occupied Crimea have ended in terms of imprisonment of between 6 and 7 years.

The charges in all such cases derive solely from the intentionally condemned ruling by Russia’s Supreme Court on 20 April 2017 which outlawed the Jehovah’s Witnesses, claiming that this world faith was ‘an extremist organization’. Russia has since unleashed waves of religious persecution at home and in occupied Crimea, hiding behind its profoundly flawed legislation on so-called ‘extremism.’

Four believers were on ‘trial’: **Taras Kuzio** (b. 1978); his wife **Daria Kuzio** (b. 1982); **Petro Zhiltsov** (b. 1987) and **Serhiy Liulin** (b. 1984). The sentences were passed by ‘judge’ **Volodymyr Romanenko** on 27 February 2023, after a ‘trial’ that had lasted almost a year. This was the first time in occupied Crimea that a new charge was laid with two of the men: Taras Kuzio and Petro Zhiltsov accused of ‘financing an extremist organization’ under Article 282.3 § 1 of Russia’s criminal code, as well as of ‘organizing’ such an ‘organization’ (Article 282.2 § 1). The sheer meaninglessness of these charges is only highlighted by the fact that Zhiltsov and Liulin received identical sentences although Zhiltsov faced two charges, and Liulin only one.

Despite the fact that the couple have two young children (a son aged 9 and 6-year-old daughter), the prosecutor had demanded a 7.5-year sentence against Taras Kuzio and a real 3-year sentence against Daria Kuzio, with this to be deferred until the younger child turned 14. 7-year sentences were sought against both Zhiltsov and Liulin.

Romanenko sentenced **Taras Kuzio** to 6.5 years' imprisonment; **Petro Zhiltsov** and **Serhiy Liulin** to 6.1 years. He imposed a 3.5-year suspended sentence against **Daria Kuzio**. It is worth noting, however, that suspended sentences can become real at any moment if the person is deemed to have 'repeated the offence'. Like the others, Daria Kuzio has effectively been 'found guilty' of what she never for a second denied, and doubtless has no intention of renouncing now, namely her religious beliefs. The sentences are not final, and will be appealed, however the only appeals with respect to Crimean prisoners of conscience which have, up till now, been allowed have been those by the prosecutor against sentences deemed 'too lenient'.

Taras Kuzio was first mentioned as facing charges after a wave of armed searches in Yalta on 20 March 2019, however at that stage it was only **Artem Gerasimov** who ended up 'on trial' (and sentenced to 6 years' imprisonment).

On 11 March 2021, the FSB stormed at least nine homes of believers in Yalta, including that of the Kuzio family. The FSB removed electronic devices and Bibles, and took Taras away. He was, however, only in custody for two days, with an occupation 'judge' at least rejecting the application for him to be placed in detention, because of his small children, and placing him under house arrest. He was initially charged only

with 'financing a supposedly extremist organization' (Article 282.3 § 1), however later the prosecution also added the 'organizing' charge, under Article 282.2 § 1.

Petro Zhiltsov was detained on 29 July 2021. He had earlier been interrogated as a 'witness' in the case against Kuzio, however the same 'investigator' – V.A. Novikov initiated identical charges (under Article 282.2 § 1), accusing Zhiltsov of both financing and of organizing the so-called 'activities of an extremist organization'. On that same date, Novikov also initiated charges of 'organizing an extremist organization', under Article 282.2 § 1 against Daria Kuzio; Serhiy Liulin and Tadevos Manukian (the charge against the latter appears to be in absentia).

As reported, Liulin was seized by FSB officers in Russia on 11 August 2021. They forced him into the boot of a minivan and drove him, in handcuffs and bound with scotch tape, for 16 hours to occupied Simferopol. He was shortly afterwards remanded in custody, and spent 203 days in the notorious Simferopol SIZO [remand prison], being held for most of that time in a cell with renowned **Crimean Tatar civic leader and journalist Nariman Dzhelyal**.

He was released under house arrest on 1 March 2022.

There were three 'secret witnesses' in this case, despite the lack of any grounds for not revealing their identity. During the hearings, Taras Kuzio noted that these individuals, identified as 'Ivanov'; 'Petrov' and 'Volodin' – all gave identical 'testimony'. Although they were supposed to have attended services for more than a year, they claimed to not remember anybody except the defendants. The three all also said that they had shared the ideology of the Jehovah's Witnesses, however were unable to explain the faith's

teachings, and, according to the JW.org report, could not even pronounce God's name correctly. It is assumed that they were in fact FSB agents. Russia standardly uses such anonymous 'witnesses' in persecuting Crimeans on political or religious grounds, with the 'judges' generally helping the prosecution by blocking questions aimed at demonstrating that these 'witnesses' are lying. This has been condemned by the UN Secretary General (in 2021) and the European Court of Human Rights found in September 2020 that Russia had violated the right to a fair trial of three men because of the unwarranted use of 'secret witnesses' to convict them.

In June 2022, the European Court of Human Rights belatedly issued a judgement, finding Russia's ban of the Jehovah's Witnesses to be unlawful and ordering, among other things, that Russia discontinue current proceedings and release those imprisoned for their faith. The judgement coincided with attempts by Moscow to backdate its withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights and, therefore, the Court. These attempts were unlawful, and the judgement is indisputably binding upon Russia. It is, however, being ignored, as are numerous other rulings by international courts and other bodies concerning all occupied parts of Ukraine.

A brief summary of other prosecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses can be found [here](#).

Photo: From left, clockwise Taras Kuzio, Serhiy Liulin, Petro Zhiltsov, Daria Kuzio Photos and montage from JW.org site

[Further reading about FORB in Russia on HRWF website](#)

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