

# **RUSSIA: Interview: Jehovah's Witnesses' response to liquidation threat**

***"We would have laughed if it were not sad for us"  
– Representative of Jehovah's Witnesses about  
conflict with Justice Ministry***

Kommersant (17.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2n8PBF2> – Today it became known that the Russian Ministry of Justice sent a lawsuit to the Supreme Court with a request to find the leading Russian organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses, to be extremist. The ministry thinks that this religious organization violated legislation on combating extremist activity. An employee of the press service of the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, Ivan Belenko, described for Kommersant what, in his view, served as the basis for the lawsuit, appeals to the European Court for Human Rights, and also further plans of the center.

***What do you see as the reason for the Ministry of Justice's lawsuit?***

The issue is that a year ago, on 2 March 2016, our organization received a warning from the office of prosecutor general. And we, of course, knew that the warning about the impermissibility of extremist activity could be fraught with serious consequences, right up to a lawsuit.

***What is perceived as extremist activity?***

It is possible to say that the entire mass of accusations of extremist activity advanced against believers comes down to a single fact: the entry of several publications of a religious nature of Jehovah's Witnesses into the Federal List of Extremism Materials of the justice ministry. When we read the decisions of courts and expert analyses, on which they are based, it evokes a sad smile, because they are self-proclaimed experts who find extremism God knows where. Right up to the fact that extremism is discovered in the words of Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy, and these words were quoted in one of our magazines, and in the statements of the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno.

Further, these materials, the very fact of their presence in Russia—in most cases they were planted in our houses of worship. We have quite entertaining, fascinating recordings from surveillance cameras where, imagine people in masks and body armor breaking into our house of worship, removing from under the body armor, from the chest, publications and shoving them into a shelf. Can you imagine that?

### ***It's hard. What followed?***

These incidents were recorded and on this basis local magistrate judges, and here the issues is a fine of 10 to 15 thousand rubles, say that they have no basis not to trust the personnel of law enforcement agencies. They fine a local religious organization—one of 400 in Russia—and then issue a warning. A second such incident—and the organization will be liquidated. At the present time eight local religious organizations have been liquidated. And on this basis the prosecutor general also issued a warning to us. They say: "Your local organizations have been found to be extremist, and that means you also are an extremist organization." They warned us that if in the course of 12 months something similar is repeated, a lawsuit for liquidation of the organization may be filed.

### ***Were there such incidents?***

In one year there were 46 incidents of the planting of extremist materialism in our houses of worship throughout Russia. And the prosecutor general's office thought that this is a basis. And in March 2017 the Ministry of Justice, at the behest of the prosecutor general's office, launched an unscheduled large-scale inspection of our administrative center.

### ***When did you learn about the justice ministry's lawsuit?***

We still have not received documents from the Ministry of Justice. We learned about it from news media and then confirmed the information on the website of the Supreme Court. Meanwhile the law requires a plaintiff who has a governmental function to first inform the defendant about the lawsuit being prepared and only after that to submit materials to a court. On this basis just yesterday the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, that is we, filed in the Russian Supreme Court a petition requesting to defer consideration of the lawsuit because of noncompliance with these rules, since here is a violation of the principle of adversarialism and equality of the parties in a judicial proceeding. That is, the court is already working hard on this case and we have not even seen what we are accused of. After all, we still need time in order to prepare. Because of this we think that such actions are mistaken.

In connection with what has happened there is an interesting circumstance. The issue is that we have appealed all cases that preceded this large lawsuit to the end, as far as the European Court for Human Rights. And what do you think? The European Court for Human Rights communicated our appeals, that is, it found them acceptable and united them into one proceeding and sent questions to the Russian government about what has happened to freedom of religious confession. The Russian government has already sent to the ECHR its own

official explanations in which, as far as I recall, it seems that there are no open calls for violence and incitement of hostility in materials of the Jehovah's Witnesses. And, I remind you, the Russian constitution guarantees to everybody freedom to hold any convictions. But the Russian anti-extremism legislation is sufficiently vague that a claim about the truth of one's own religion, and indeed even if not expressed explicitly, but somehow indirectly, it would seem is interpreted by expert linguists, gifted and highly educated people, as propaganda of one's exclusiveness, and that means, extremism. This is funny. And we would laugh if what comes from it were not so sad for us.

***What actions do you intend to take in response to the lawsuit in the Supreme Court?***

If this case is not deferred for consideration, then of course we will try to defend ourselves. We have already formulated, even before this lawsuit became known, our official objections to the document of that inspection that was conducted by the Ministry of Justice in March and the results of which, apparently, lie at the basis of this lawsuit. Of course, we will object to the lawsuit and we will insist that we are infinitely far from extremism and to accuse us of this is completely untrue, incorrect, and mistaken. We will insist that the plaintiff's demands of the Ministry of Justice be rejected.

Interview conducted by Valeria Mishina.

(tr. by PDS, posted 19 March 2017)

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