

RUSSIA: Jehovah's Witnesses Banned in Russia: Human Rights Organizations appeal to Russia's Supreme Court and Presidential Administration.



FOREF – Europe/HRWF (05.05.2017) – VIENNA/BRUSSELS, The *Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe* (FOREF) and *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF) urge the Supreme Court of Russia to overturn its 20 April 2017 decision to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses from the country and seize their assets. FOREF and HRWF also call on President Putin and his administration to resort to a "transparent and frank" dialogue to promote better understanding of the nature of the Jehovah's Witnesses, as proposed by the religious group

"The allegation that the Jehovah's Witnesses are an extremist group is transparently false, and the ban should be overturned," argues Dr. Aaron Rhodes, President of FOREF. "The decision not only violates basic human rights obligations, but also puts all Russian citizens at further risk of arbitrary legal judgments. It makes a mockery of their legal system and humiliates Russia on the world stage" he added.

United Nations monitors and other experts agree that neither the doctrines nor the conduct of the Jehovah's Witnesses can be called "extremist" with any credibility whatsoever. On the contrary, the group advocates respect for political and governmental authorities, and keeping clear of political matters.

There are about 170,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation, who worship in almost 400 branches. The Russian Justice Ministry alleged that the group is a "threat to the rights of citizens, public order and public security." But the Jehovah's Witnesses are known as a denomination that rejects violence.

Indeed, the weakness of the General Prosecutor's case against the Jehovah's Witnesses, a group that has long faced persecution in Russia, is obvious to any independent observer. Consisting of vague allegations, it offers no proof, no motivation, and leaves an impression that the Jehovah's Witnesses are being denied their internationally-guaranteed rights, and their rights under Article 28 of the Russian Federal Constitution, simply for their doctrinal differences with the Russian Orthodox Church.

If the Supreme Court ruling stands, participation in the activities of the group will be punishable by a fine of up to 600,000 rubles (over US\$10,600) and a prison term of up to ten years.

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For more information and/or interviews:

Peter Zoehrer (Executive Director, FOREF) +43 664-523-8794

Aaron Rhodes (President, FOREF) +49-170-323-8314

Email: foref.office@gmail.com

Blog: foref-europe.org

Willy Fautré (Executive Director, HRWF)

Email: international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.net

Website: www.hrwf.eu

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