

# **RUSSIA: Officials continue to hound African Pentecostals studying in Russia**

## ***How the Yarovaya Package made a vicious violator of the administrative code out of a Zimbabwean protestant***

Russia Religion News (15.06.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2HNrT8m> – A court in Nizhny Novgorod fined a student from Zimbabwe, Kudzai Niamarebvu, 30,000 rubles for an interview in which she is called a “hero of faith.” For Kudzai, this is the second fine because of “missionary activity” in a year.

The 25-year-old Kudzai Niamarebvu came to Russia from Zimbabwe in 2012, to study on the medical faculty of the Volga Research Medical University in Nizhny Novgorod. At that time, the largest protest actions in many years were going on, because of the elections to the State Duma and the return of Vladimir Putin to the post of president. At the same time, authorities began to make harsher anti-extremism legislation and to regulate the internet yet more. Over time, imprisonment for reposting ceased surprising anybody, but all these processes did not concern Kudzai; the girl was studying in the university and attending the “Embassy of Jesus” protestant church. It is difficult to say unequivocally whether she engaged in any social and political activity: while having studied in Russia for six years, she had not mastered the Russian language and she communicated in the main with other foreigners.

In social networks (Russian friends advised her to set up an account on "VKontakte"), she published posts about love for God. In the autumn of 2016, Kudzai acted in a video where she invited friends to come to the Embassy of Jesus for a party planned in November, which was called a Welcome Party. As attorney Alexander Malinin told Meduza, in the video Kudzai said that there would be African songs and dances at the party.

Several months before the publication of the video, President Vladimir Putin signed the "Yarovaya Package," one of the most criticized legislative initiatives in the sphere of antiterrorism legislation and regulation of the information technology sphere. Among other things, the law changed article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law (violation of legislation on freedom of conscience and freedom of religious confession and on religious associations), adding to it three new kinds of law violations, and it introduced requirements for missionary activity. Mediazona has already written in detail how the change in the law affected not just religious leaders.

Publication of the video was translated for the Embassy of Jesus immediately into two administrative cases on the basis of the substance of article 5.26 that had recently appeared: on the basis of part 3, the religious organization was fined 30,000 rubles for publishing a video without identification information with the full name of the church, and on the basis of part 4, it was fined 50,000 rubles for Kudzai's missionary activity without pertinent permission. At the same time, the materials of the cases indicated that Kudzai had conducted missionary activity on 26 April 2017. The press secretary of

the Embassy of Jesus, Yulia Ermoshina, told Mediazona that it is unclear why the security personnel thought that Kudzai engaged in missionary activity on this particular day.

There were no charges against the girl herself, although in the winter of 2018 she learned to her surprise that a report had been composed against her on the basis of part 2 of article 18.8 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law (violation by a foreigner of the rules of visiting Russia expressed in the incompatibility of the declared goals of entry with activity actually conducted). The Ministry of Internal Affairs argued the case in this way: Kudzai entered Russia supposedly for study, but in reality she engaged in missionary activity.

The native of Zimbabwe insisted that she did not engage in any kind of missionary activity but simply invited friends to a party. The Sormov district court of Nizhny Novgorod oblast did not listen to her arguments, ordering a fine of Kudzai of 5,000 rubles and deportation of the sixth-year student from Russia six months before receiving her diploma. “[Attorney Vladimir] Malinin said that he tried to become her lawyer, but when the judge asked Niamarebvu in Russian whether she needed a lawyer, she did not understand what he was talking about and she answered in the negative,” Meduza wrote. However, Kudzai lucked out: the appellate instance permitted her to leave the country by the end of June so that the African would be able to return to her homeland with higher education.

“Students stopped attending church; the video, photos, quotes about Christianity, Christmas and Easter greetings were removed. Before that, the Africans were not even able to think that singing in church or posting Christian topics on a

personal page could be a crime," Galina Liamina, a Russian language teacher for foreigners, wrote in VKontakte. "Now the Africans are being taken to court one after the other. Evidence being used include screens from social networks and links with YouTube from 2016 and 2017, collected previously, since after Kudzai's case the Africans have removed the 'kompromat,' and even their own pages."

For example, this is what happened with Nosisa Shiba, a native of Swaziland. The Sormov district court fined her on the basis of the same article for violating the rules of staying in Russia 7,000 rubles and ordered her deportation no later than 30 June. Shiba also is a sixth-year student and she was permitted to complete her studies. The reason for opening her case was the African's participation in an Easter concert. Her performance can be seen on the video at the end of the seventh minute, when believers are singing 'Jesus, arisen for me.'

Kudzai also was not helped by the removal of the video from the social network. Security agents had documented her pages well in advance. Another administrative case was opened against the girl on the basis of part 5 of article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law (conduct of missionary activity by a foreigner in violation of the requirements of legislation on freedom of conscience and freedom of religious confession and on religious associations). Later, as attorney Malinin described for Mediazona, this case was closed because of the lapse of the statute of limitations. Judging by his profile on VKontakte, the lawyer, like Kudzai, belongs to the Christian Pentecostals: his avatar is a collage of a photograph depicting Jesus embracing a girl, a cross, a heart, and an inscription, "Jesus Christ, my God and my Lord."

In the Pentecostals' church they are indignant about such treatment of their fellow believer. In April, the press secretary of the Embassy of Jesus, Yulia Ermoshina, recorded an interview with Kudzai which later was published on YouTube. For twenty minutes, Kudzai, with the help of a translator, describes for Yulia her misadventures. She [i.e., Yulia] peers intently, nods, and again with the help of the translator poses clarifying questions, and in the end she says: "Kudzai, thank you very much; you are a real hero of faith, and we believe along with you that, actually, the court will make a positive decision on your matter and you will finish your studies in Russia fine and you will go home with good impressions from this country and with a good heart. We also believe that this law will not affect foreigners negatively and hinder their visiting those churches that they have been accustomed to attending from childhood."

"What a pity for Russia. Even Africans are in shock. Lord, have mercy!" one YouTube user comments regarding this interview. It became the basis for opening a third case against Kudzai Niamarebv, again on part 5 of article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law. Judging from the materials of the case, the F.S.B. is interested specifically in the last sentence of the press secretary of the church in which she calls Kudzai a "real hero of faith." The security service ordered a complex expert analysis, asking the specialists to answer the question: "What does the term 'hero of faith' mean in the doctrine of Christians of Evangelical Faith and who can be acknowledged as a 'hero of faith,' and what kind of obligations does this recognition impose on the 'hero of faith' and on adherents of the doctrine respecting him?"

The commission of three persons, including the chief editor of the magazine "Kholm Poetov" and kandidat of psychological sciences Andrei Tremasov, replied: "The film has a 'covert missionary character,' and 'heroes of faith' are 'people who, from the point of view of Christians of Evangelical Faith, God has chosen for preaching;' they are 'instruments in the hands of God' in the work of preaching, that is, evangelism." "By the very fact of their existence, 'heroes of faith,' in the opinion of Pentecostals, are able to win over people. Thus, the designation of Kudzai Niamarebvu as a 'hero of faith' and the video of her itself are a covert form of proclamation of the faith of Pentecostals. Foreign students, who viewed this video, were unambiguously urged to follow Kudzai Niamarebvu as a 'hero of faith' and thus to violate Russian legislation," the experts concluded. In conclusion it was noted that any religious group of Pentecostals can recognize a person as a "hero of faith" and this recognition imposes on him the obligation "to engage actively in missionary activity," but this does not affect other people in any way.

On 9 June, the court ordered for Kudzai a fine of 30,000 rubles. The Embassy of Jesus says that the girl does not have such money so that the church will pay the fine for her. The native of Zimbabwe herself decided not to talk with journalists until after she leaves Russia. (tr. by PDS, posted 13 June 2018)

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