

Notice: Undefined index: et_header_layout in /home/hrwfe90/domains/hrwf.eu/public_html/wp-content/plugins/pdf-print/pdf-print.php on line 1214

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RUSSIA: Liquidating the SOVA Center: the official end of religious freedom in Russia

Photo: SOVA's Olga Sibireva. From Twitter.

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By destroying the leading organization monitoring religious liberty violations, the Putin regime can no longer pretend that relics of freedom of religion

remain in Russia.

by Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (04.05.2023) – The Moscow City Court decision of April 27 “liquidating” the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, a leading Russian NGO monitoring violations of freedom of religion or belief, is one of the saddest news coming from Russia in recent times. We are all indebted to SOVA, not only for information not available anywhere else, but also for in-depth analyses explaining why the Putin regime behaves as it does in its assault against religious liberty. SOVA has announced that it will appeal, but it seems unlikely that a politically motivated decision may be overturned.

On the other hand, paradoxically the Moscow City Court decision makes the situation of religion in Russia clearer than it was before. To be honest, I was surprised that even after the war of aggression against Ukraine was started, SOVA was still allowed to continue its precious work. I was even more surprised that, as we reported in Bitter Winter, on September 28, 2022, SOVA’s Olga Sibireva was allowed to travel to Warsaw and speak during the OSCE Human Dimension Meeting in Warsaw at a side event organized by the NGO CAP-LC, and supported by our magazine, on “Anti-Cult Ideology and FECRIS [the anti-cult European Federation whose Russian branch supports the invasion of Ukraine]: Dangers for Religious Freedom.” I was a speaker in that event too, and found Sibireva’s speech moderate, balanced, and well-informed. However, it comes out that her participation at the Warsaw event is precisely one of the “crimes” and the “gross and irreparable violations of the law” for which SOVA has been liquidated.

I had repeatedly asked myself why SOVA, and a few other “normal” voices, had not yet been suffocated in Russia. A tentative answer was that the Putin regime still wanted to pretend that different views on religion coexisted in Russia,

from the lunatic ramblings of the Russian FECRIS and its leaders Alexander Dvorkin and Alexander Novopashin to SOVA's moderate attitude. There was no freedom of religion in Russia, but at least some limited spaces were left where one could not change the dire situation of religious liberty but could at least talk about it.

The most important of these spaces is now being closed. Russia is serving notice to the world that not only the practice of religious liberty, but even the possibility of discussing about freedom of religion or belief have been abrogated in the country. The Putin regime is now officially one of the pariah states, together with China and North Korea, where the repression of religious freedom is not even hidden.

Friends of freedom of religion throughout the world should mobilize for SOVA. They will probably not save it—but at least they should ask democratic states and international religious organizations to note the official declaration of end of any relic of freedom of religion in Russia. There is something that can and should be done, and talking is not enough. Magnitsky-type sanctions should hit the main architects of the repression of religious liberty in Russia, including Dvorkin and Novopashin. Interreligious and ecumenical dialogue, and invitation to international conferences, should cease for these religious leaders—bishops, starting from Patriarch Kirill, muftis, and Buddhist leaders—who aid and abet Putin's regime and its bloody religious repression (they also support the war of aggression against Ukraine). Business as usual with Russia can no longer continue in the religious field either.



Photo: SOVA's Director, Alexander Verkhovsky. Credits.

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR),

an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion and of the executive board of University of California Press' Nova Religio. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

Further reading about FORB in Russia on HRWF website

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