

RUSSIA: Jehovah's Witness guilty of illegal evangelism

Jehovah's Witnesses follower from Asha fined 25,000 rubles

Dostup (31.05.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2sleu0Q> – A resident of Asha (Cheliabinsk province) was fined 25,000 rubles (400 EUR) for missionary activity in the name of the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, which is prohibited in Russia, a correspondent of the news agency Dostup reports.

According to information of the district prosecutor's office, a man was found guilty on the basis of part 4 of article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law of the RF (conducting missionary activity with violation of the requirements of legislation on freedom of conscience and religious confession and on religious associations).

It was reported earlier that a resident of Asha conducted missionary activity since May 2016: twice a week, on strictly established days, he gathered in his residence on Vavilov St. people for joint reading of prayers and discussion of biblical commandments and convictions of the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, with distribution of informational brochures.

The monitoring agency notes that all this occurred without the appropriate notification about the start of activity of a religious group on the territory of the Asha district. In addition, in accordance with federal law, the conduct of missionary activity in residences is not permitted.

We recall, on 20 April 2017 the Russian Supreme Court found the activity of the "Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia" to be extremist and it ordered to

liquidate it, converting the property into state income, and to ban its activity on the territory of the country. (tr. by PDS, posted 31 May 2017)

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RUSSIA: Russian president's Council on Human Rights opposes anti-evangelism law

Council on Human Rights insists amendments about missionary activity have nothing to do with extremism

Vedomosti.ru (25.01.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2kiqFui> – Legislative regulation that was introduced by the “Yarovaya Package” entails the restriction of the constitutional rights of citizens and is disproportionate to its effectiveness while combating terrorism. This is said in the draft of an expert conclusion on the package of antiterrorism amendments (whose authors are State Duma Deputy Irina Yarovaya and Senator

Viktor Ozerov), which was prepared by the chairman of the Council on Human Rights (CHR) [under the president].

The occasion for preparing the conclusion (Vedomosti is acquainted with it) was the collection of 100,000 signatures for rescinding the "Yarovaya Package" on the website of the Russian Public Initiative and the discussion of possible introduction of amendments. At the time of the consideration of the draft law in the State Duma, the CHR issued an expert conclusion, the rights advocates recall: some of the recommendations were taken into account, but after this new provisions were introduced into the law, which also evoked criticism.

The conclusions of the CHR about the rules of the "Yarovaya Package" pertaining to mobile operators and Internet providers and also changes in the Criminal Code in the main are the very same as in the first conclusion. Thus the requirement about storage of data the CHR thinks is "an unprecedented encroachment on the privacy of the personal life of citizens," and the tightening of a number of articles of the Criminal Code and the introduction of new kinds of crimes is unjustified and often devoid of sense. As regards that part of the package that appeared at the last moment before its adoption by the State Duma and imposing new restrictions on missionary activity, the rights advocates propose removing it entirely from active regulation and revising it from the start, if the government considers this necessary. It is not clear how these amendments to the law on freedom of conscience have anything to do with the antiterrorism package, the CHR emphasizes, and besides the law has already provoked arbitrary law enforcement—for example, protestants primarily have been held accountable on its basis.

Earlier last week an expert working group under the leadership of Minister for Affairs of Open Government Mikhail Abyzov, after reviewing the petition from Russian Public Initiative, rejected a proposal to abolish the "Yarovaya Package,"

limiting the recommendations to the government to conduct additional assessment of the technical, organizational, and social aspects of implementing the law for storing the contents of telephone conversations and Internet traffic. In addition, the State Duma was advised to reconsider how to change the law in order to eliminate the possibility of broad interpretation of the concepts of "missionary activity" and "extremism."

CHR Chairman Mikhail Fedotov did not want to comment on the draft of the conclusion, saying only that it is at the stage of voting by members of the council. The director of the SOVA Center, CHR member Alexander Verkhovsky, thinks that the part about evangelism should be completely eliminated, although such a suggestion is not feasible: "But it is possible to try to encourage the legislature to think up something different for the sake of that goal, which may be considered antiterrorist: current standards have nothing to do with that goal." Law enforcement practice has already shown that the police, in whose competence these affairs are located, simply do not understand the rule about evangelism, Verkhovsky emphasizes: "If the Duma is not prepared to eliminate this part of the package, then at least let it start a normal discussion. Then possibly it can clarify which administrative measures can realistically prevent terrorists but not restrict so radically preaching as such."

The conclusion of the CHR shows how crude was the package of amendments, and comments on it are essentially a proposal to eliminate it, says that director of the Center for Study of Problems of Religious and Society of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Roman Lunkin. The "Yarovaya Package" introduced confusion into legislation in the sphere of religious policy. Therefore any clarifications and amendments also may be taken as interference in affairs of religious associations and violation of freedom of conscience, the expert thinks: "Many religious movements perceived the

intention to control missionaries within the framework of an antiterrorism package as an insult. Believers began to be perceived as potential extremists. One gets the impression that the 'Yarovaya Package' was adopted without reading the law on freedom of conscience into which amendments were introduced."

The law that existed before June 2016 suited all religious associations, Lunkin emphasizes: "Now leaders and parishioners of the most diverse churches and movements are wondering what kind of state is this which gets satisfaction from the police and FSB fining Baptists, Pentecostals, and Hindus and deporting foreigners who have decided to worship in Russia." (tr. by PDS, posted 26 January 2017)

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