

RUSSIA: Two US Mormons released from custody return home

– RFE/RL (21.03.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2Tob5ui>– Two Mormons who were detained in Russia and accused of violating immigration laws have been released and are returning home to the United States.

Americans Kole Brodowski, 20, and David Gaag, 19, “have been released” and were returning to the United States, Eric Hawkins, a spokesman for the U.S.-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said in an e-mail to RFE/RL on March 20.

Russian media reports said the two men had been deported. The regional news site Novaya Kuban quoted unnamed sources as saying they took a predawn flight from the southern city of Krasnodar to Istanbul and would travel from there to New York.

Brodowski and Gaag, described by the church as “volunteers,” were **detained by the authorities** on March 1 “while engaged in a meeting at a local meetinghouse” in the Black Sea coastal city Novorossiisk, Hawkins told RFE/RL in a previous statement.

A court in Novorossiisk ruled on March 7 that the two U.S. citizens must be deported for what it called violations of immigration laws.

The detentions come with growing scrutiny within Russia on religious groups that don’t qualify as one of the four formally recognized religions.

Freedom of religion is formally guaranteed in Russia, but the Russian government and the dominant Russian Orthodox Church

frown on proselytizing by foreign-based religious communities.

Russian law sets out Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four traditional religions, and other faiths – including U.S.-based Christian communities – often face discrimination or restrictive action by state authorities.

Russia outlawed the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017, declaring it "extremist," and the group says that seven of its members in Russia were **tortured by law enforcement officers** in the Siberian city of Surgut in mid-February.

A Danish Jehovah's Witness, Dennis Christensen, was convicted on February 6 of "organizing the activity of an extremist organization" and sentenced to six years in prison by a court in the western city of Oryol.

In its annual report on human rights around the world, issued on March 13, the U.S. State Department said that human rights abuses in Russia included "severe restrictions on religious freedom."

While in custody, Brodowski and Gaag "were treated very well and maintained regular contact with their families and mission president," Hawkins said in the March 20 e-mail.

"The church is closely monitoring conditions in Russia for all volunteers and will continue to fully comply with Russian law," he said.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon church, has long been a presence in Russia, with members teaching English classes and proselytizing.

According to church figures, registered Mormons grew from 300 in 1991 – the year the Soviet Union collapsed – to more than 14,000 a decade later. Today, the church claims 23,000 adherents in Russia.

Brodowski was “nearing the end of his service” and would return home to the state of California, Hawkins said.

Gaag “will return to the United States for a short time, receive any needed support, and then continue his service in a new mission,” he said.

RUSSIA: Mormons worry about a fate like Jehovah’s Witnesses

Kuban Mormons fear repressions against their church

Russia Religion News (11.03.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2TKVzNC> – The decision of the Krasnodar territory court about the deportation of two American Mormons is connected with the start of repressions against this church in Russia, a believer from Novorossiisk and the lawyer Sergei Glizuntsa suggest. In the case there is no evidence that the missionaries taught the English language under the guise of preaching, the defense attorney insists.

Kavkazskii Uzel has reported that on 2 March a court in Novorossiisk ordered the deportation to the U.S.A. of adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints David Udo Hague and Cole Davis Brodovsky. The Krasnodar territory court left that decision in force, agreeing with the conclusion that they taught the English language under the guise of religious activity. The American citizens themselves did not acknowledge guilt, explaining that they merely

conducted conversations in the English language on abstract topics.

In the opinion of Hague and Brodovsky's lawyer, Sergei Glizuntsa, the decision of the two courts may speak of the start of repressions against Mormons in Russia. "I think that it went through all instances like the Jehovah's Witnesses* were treated," he told a Kavkazskii Uzel correspondent.

On 20 April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court granted the petition of the Ministry of Justice regarding the liquidation of all Russian organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses* as extremist and on 16 August the "Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia*" and all of its local affiliates wound up on the list of forbidden organizations, a report prepared by Kavkazskii Uzel, "Jehovah's Witnesses*-extremists or victims of injustice?" notes.

This same fear was also expressed to a Kavkazskii Uzel correspondent by a Mormon woman from Novorossiisk, Irina. "I think that they are beginning to persecute us like the Jehovah's Witnesses* and this is the 'first swallow.' Our organization is not prohibited in Russia, but most likely this is not for long. The Russian Orthodox Church has already declared that we 'warp the minds' of youth. This is not so. We advocate a healthy lifestyle and family values," the woman declared.

At the meeting with which law enforcement found fault, a discussion was conducted in the English language about the traditions and culture of Mormons, she explained. Such

conversations fall under the definition of volunteer and missionary activity, which Hague and Brodovsky indicated were the goals of their coming to Russia, the believer is sure.

“The guys came in order to become acquainted with our country. They are very open and they were helping someone all the time. They worked in social shelters, helped the elderly, and made repairs in the apartments of disabled persons. During meetings in the house of worship they described their own country. Our youth had the opportunity to talk a bit in English in order to practice,” Irina, a parishioner of the church, reported.

The guilt of Hague and Brodovsky was not proven, the lawyer declared.

There was no evidence of illegal educational activity in the administrative case, Glizuntsa declared. He said the young people simply met with Russians in the meetinghouse and talked about America and asked them to talk about themselves. On 1 March, personnel of the Federal Migration Service came to the meetinghouse and took descriptions from all persons present in the meeting, but there was no audio recording of the meeting itself, the lawyer noted.

“There were no syllabi, no homework assignments, no payment for these services. It turns out that there is only one indicator of their illegal activity—they corrected a person who spoke English incorrectly. I do not consider that teaching, because I also correct anybody who speaks Russian incorrectly,” the lawyer noted.

The case is based on the words of one of the Russians who perceived the meeting as an educational process, Sergei Glizuntsa reported. "But there was neither a blackboard on which one could write or alphabet to study nor notebooks in order to write notes; there was nothing," the lawyer emphasized.

He said that he intends to appeal the decision of the Krasnodar territory court, which left in force the decision of the court of the first instance. "We will appeal further, to the Supreme Court. So that there will not be a decision of a court and such situations will not arise with other representatives of religious organizations," Glizuntsa explained.

At the present time, the Mormons are being held in a special facility for foreign citizens in Gulkevich district. They have not complained about the conditions of detention. They were allowed to telephone their parents and they are fed three times a day, their attorney explained. "Unfortunately, there are no deadlines for the deportation. People from the near abroad are kept there for six months. There is an issue of paperwork and the decision from the territory court has just today been sent for implementation," Sergei Glizuntsa complained.

*The organization is considered to be extremist and its activity is prohibited in Russia by decision of a court. (tr. by PDS, posted 13 March 2019)

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