

For Russia, journalist's self-immolation is a wake-up call

Irina Slavina's last message was: 'For my death I ask you to blame the Russian Federation.'

By Eva Hartog

POLITICO (09.10.2020) – <https://politi.co/3lInVlK> – Before the pallbearers walked out there was a protracted silence. Then, as Irina Slavina's two children led the white coffin carrying her scorched corpse toward the hearse, the crowd of several hundred broke out into spontaneous applause.

To many of her supporters, Slavina's self-immolation was an act of stoic self-sacrifice and the ultimate rallying cry. Many compared her to Jan Palach, the Czech student who set himself on fire to protest Soviet occupation in 1969.

On October 2, Slavina made her way to the Interior Ministry, sat down on a bench between two bronze figures, a monument dedicated to Russian law enforcement "through the ages," and set herself on fire.

There is no doubt she meant to die – footage shows her pushing away a bystander who tried to save her from the flames even as she must have suffered excruciating pain.

Several hours earlier she had written a post on Facebook: "For my death I ask you to blame the Russian Federation."

Older social media posts that have surfaced since suggest Slavina had been considering the idea for at least a year.

In her home city of Nizhny Novgorod, some 400 kilometers east of Moscow, Slavina held celebrity status as the founder of the independent news website Koza.Press. A one-woman band, it was nonetheless among the most cited outlets in the region, providing relentless coverage of local misdeeds in a no-nonsense factual style.

"She was a straight shooter but very balanced, she never let her emotions affect her writing," Stanislav Dmitriyevsky, a prominent human rights activist, told POLITICO at a memorial service Tuesday. "But underneath it she suffered."

He recalled her driving him home after he was released from the umpteenth detention and saying: "I can't live like this. I keep writing about all of this injustice but nothing is changing."

Though many in her circle could recall similar moments of despair, the 47-year-old was known for her stoicism and her suicide has come as a huge shock.

Above all, it has drawn new attention to the toxic triple whammy faced by independent journalists in Russia generally, and regional journalists in particular; of financial pressure, harassment facilitated by draconic laws and a seemingly apathetic readership.

A day before Slavina's suicide she wrote that 12 law enforcement officers had raided her apartment at 6 a.m. after forcing open her door, confiscating USB sticks, phones and computers in a hunt for evidence of ties to Open Russia, an organization backed by former oligarch-turned-Putin-critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

The case itself and its connection to Slavina are, to put it mildly, tenuous: She had merely attended an event organized by the election monitoring organization Golos, at a property owned by a local businessman who, to add a tragicomic spin, also heads the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, a parody cult.

It is he who is under investigation for supposed links to Open Russia (a connection both sides have denied). But that hasn't stopped the authorities from implicating Slavina alongside a number of activists and opposition politicians – supposedly as witnesses.

“The pressure she was under would have been bearable if it had just been about her personally. But it was affecting everybody who in any way raised their voice,” Marina Chufarina, who as a regional coordinator for Golos organized the event in question, said.

Chufarina said she was expecting a similar raid at her own home “any day now.”

Slavina was no newbie to harassment. In recent years, Russia has introduced a spate of increasingly restrictive laws and last year alone the journalist was given a taste of a number of them.

In March she was convicted of breaking protest laws for leading a small group through the city to commemorate the murdered opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, a Nizhny Novgorod native.

Just before summer, she was convicted of cooperating with an “undesirable organization” (Open Russia again) for promoting a series of pro-democracy lectures on social media. And in October she was convicted of “disrespecting the authorities” after mocking a memorial plaque to Stalin online.

More recently, she was found guilty of “spreading fake news” after writing about an alleged first case of coronavirus in a different town.

Combined, the convictions resulted in fines totaling some 160,000 rubles (€1,700) – about five times the average Nizhny Novgorod salary. Moreover, every day spent in court was one she couldn’t spend writing.

The use of the lawbook over the fist or bullet – or other means of silencing independent voices which were popular in Russia in the nineties and noughties – might look like evolution. But especially for regional journalists, the constant court cases and raids, or risk thereof, pose an existential threat.

“For us crowdfunding the money to replace even a couple of laptops is a big problem,” Andrei Grishin, the editor of independent outlet Vesma in Russia’s Far Eastern Magadan, said.

Independent outlets like his face a bind: stripped of state funds they can’t accept foreign grant money lest they be labeled “foreign agents.” Meanwhile, local businesses are wary of placing ads in outlets that might be deemed anti-government. So even in good times, their futures hang by a silver thread – let alone in bad times.

“Irina made a radical choice in expressing her protest. But a huge number of editors and journalists at a local level are being pushed in that same direction by the Russian authorities. If nothing changes, I don’t know what will become of Russian journalism in the coming years,” said Grishin.

In Russia, harassment does not discriminate by size or location; journalists at large outlets in Moscow are persecuted, too. Famously, the investigative Moscow journalist Ivan Golunov was slapped with drug-dealing charges last summer and more recently the former military reporter Ivan Safronov was detained on treason charges.

But in both cases, visibility has acted as a shield, sparking public protest or at least ensuring the authorities' actions do not go unnoticed. Sometimes, a regional case breaks through to national headlines such as that of Svetlana Prokopyeva, a journalist in Pskov, who risked landing in jail for "justifying terrorism" in a column but ending up receiving a fine.

Most of the time, however, distance from Moscow correlates negatively to visibility, even within the journalistic community. That leaves local journalists extra vulnerable to the grudges and gripes of local authorities equipped with increasingly draconian laws.

"For years we covered the news around Slavina. But we failed to see the systematic pressure being applied to one and the same person, our fellow journalist," Alexei Venediktov, chief editor of the opposition-leaning radio station Ekho Moskvy, said in a broadcast. Venediktov is among those who have signed an open letter demanding the possible prosecution of officials who might have contributed to Slavina's suicide.

Even the Russian authorities seem to have been cowed. Hours after Slavina's self-immolation, investigators released a defensive statement disputing any link between their raid and her action, saying she had just been a witness. And in a highly unusual personal Instagram post, the governor of the Nizhny Novgorod region, Gleb Nikitin, pledged he would take personal charge of a probe into her death.

But many in Slavina's circle are unimpressed, asking: If Slavina was only a witness, why was her home raided and her property confiscated? And if the governor appreciated her work, why hadn't he stopped the authorities from harassing her before? To them, the statements just underscore the arbitrariness of the repression she was subjected to.

At the memorial service on Tuesday, Slavina's inner circle was adamant that her suicide was not the result of mental instability – a narrative peddled by pro-Kremlin media and hinted at by Russian investigators – nor of helplessness. To them, her self-immolation was a final act designed to change minds in a way she felt her journalism could not.

“She didn't want to die tragically, she wanted change,” Maria Popova, an environmental activist whose acquaintance with Slavina goes back a decade, said.

Unlike in Palach's case, however, Slavina's death has largely been met with stunned resignation. In a city with a population of more than a million and a country of more than 140 million, the turnout of several hundred at the memorial is a drop in the ocean. “Where is everybody? Why aren't there tens of thousands of people?” asked Stanislav Dmitriyevsky, the rights activist.

Some of Slavina's acquaintances said she had become increasingly demoralized about the general apathy in Russian society and the lack of reader donations. A day after her mother's suicide, Slavina's daughter stood in the city center with a handwritten sign saying: “While my mother burned you

stayed silent.” The message will have been lost on many of those passing by.

Still, to her followers and peers, Slavina is a source of inspiration.

Speakers at the memorial service did not mince their words and hundreds marched through the city center towards the site of Slavina’s death opposite the police headquarters, at one point chanting “Butchers!”

The website Koza.Press has continued to publish news, for now about Slavina herself. But there are plans to keep it running.

And in Magadan, too, work continues unabated. “You’re always internally bracing for some bad turn of events, so you have to take precautionary measures,” said Grishin, the editor of Vesma.

“But if they come for us, we’ll know what to do.”

Photo credit: Eva Hartog for POLITICO

Fifty international scholars call for an end of the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

CESNUR (01.10.2020) – Fifty leading international scholars of religion have signed an appeal calling for the immediate end of the persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, a country where members of the religious organization are routinely arrested and sentenced to terms in jail, and where all activities of their congregation are forbidden. The document was born out of a conference on opposition to the Jehovah's Witnesses held online from Vilnius, Lithuania, on September 3, whose speakers were the first to sign, followed by colleagues from all over the world, including Russia itself and China.

“It seems that Jehovah's Witnesses are really punished in Russia because of their growth, which is an unwelcome competition for the powerful Russian Orthodox Church,” commented Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne, who helped draft the statement. “The government and the Russian Orthodox Church may not like proselytization, added Alessandro Amicarelli, a human rights lawyer in London and the president of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB), also a co-drafter of the appeal, but the freedom to proselytize and to persuade members of other religions is an integral part of freedom of religion under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Russia has subscribed.”

The fifty scholars urged “President Putin and his

administration to take action to cease the systematic and senseless persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses, a community of peaceful, law-abiding citizens who only ask to practice their faith in peace."

See the text of the letter and the signatures at:
<https://www.cesnur.org/2020/jehovahs-witnesses-statement.htm>.

For more information, email: cesnur_to@virgilio.it,
contact@freedomofbelief.net.

RUSSIA: Special bimonthly FORB Digest (16-30.09.2020)

**29.09.20 – Judge says prosecution did not prove case against
Jehovah's Witness**

Link to full text in Russian:

<https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2020/09/29/sud-vo-vladivostok-e-vernul-delo-svidetelnicy-iegovy-v-prokuraturu>

The Pervorechensk district court of Vladivostok ordered the return to the prosecutor's office of the case of Jehovah's Witness Elena Barmakina, accused of participation in the activity of an extremist organization (part 2, article 282.2 C.C.). This is reported on the website of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

Continue reading...

26.09.20 – Russian parliament delays consideration of controversial changes in religion law

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://ria.ru/20200926/zakon-1577815329.html>

The draft law “On introducing changes into federal law ‘On freedom of conscience and religious associations’” can be adopted only in the event of its approval by the traditional confessions, declared the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow patriarchate, Metropolitan of Volokolamsk Ilarion.

Continue reading...

25.09.20 – Black Sea resort church fined for breaking antievangelism law

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://anapa-ch.ru/pastora-missionerskoj-cerkvi-anapy-priznal-i-narushitelem-i-oshtrafovali/>

During a verification of compliance with legislation on freedom of conscience and religious associations back in the summer, the Anapa inter-district prosecutor’s office established that the religious group “Tree of Life Church Anapa” was conducting missionary activity without submitting the mandatory notification about the start of its activity in the directorate of the Ministry of Justice of the territory.

Continue reading...

25.09.20 – Two years of conditional imprisonment for faith. A 73-year-old woman and a married couple sentenced in Kamchatka

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://jw-russia.org/news/2020/09/10.html>

Kamchatka residents Vera Zolotova and spouses Konstantin and Snezhana Bazhenovs were found guilty of

involvement in the activities of an extremist organization.

Continue reading...

25.09.20 – State acts to legally abolish Siberian sect

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://rg.ru/2020/09/25/reg-sibfo/krasnoarskie-prokurory-zai-avili-isk-o-likvidacii-cerkvi-poslednego-zaveta.html>

On the basis of an inspection, the prosecutor's office of Krasnoyarsk territory sent to a court a lawsuit requesting the liquidation of the religious organization "Church of the Last Testament." As reported in the press service of the office of prosecutor general of the Russian Federation, the basis for submitting a lawsuit was incidents discovered in the course of an inspection that involved experts.

Continue reading...

25.09.20 – The detention of believers from Dagestan was illegal. This was the ruling of the Fifth Court of Cassation in Pyatigorsk

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://jw-russia.org/news/2020/09/9.html>

The confusion on the faces of prosecutors on September 21, 2020 was caused by the decision of the Fifth Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction that the detention of of four Jehovah's Witnesses from Makhachkala was illegal.

Continue reading...

24.09.20 – Russian law enforcement in Far East gives Jehovah's Witnesses a break

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://www.sibreal.org/a/30855335.html>

The directorate of the F.S.B. [Federal Security Service] for

Sakhalin oblast in late August ended the criminal prosecution of residents of Nevelsk for religious activity. The case against Viacheslav Ivanov and Dmitry Kulakov was closed, a representative of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, Yaroslav Sivulsky, reported on 24 September.

Continue reading...

23.09.20 – Law enforcement moves against Russian sect in Siberia

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://tass.ru/proisshestviya/9525939>

The Central district court of Novosibirsk on Tuesday placed Sergei Torop into custody; he is the founder of the Church of the Last Testament who calls himself Vissarion. Also detained were leaders of the religious association, Vladimir Vedernikov and Vadim Redkin.

Continue reading...

22.09.20 – Drawn-out trial reaches conclusion for Jehovah's Witness

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/354436/>

The prosecution requested two years in a penal colony settlement for a Jehovah's Witness from Maisky, Yury Zalipaev. Zalipaev's defense attorney requested that the court fully exonerate him, recalling the contradictions in witnesses' testimony.

Continue reading...

21.09.20 – Russian parliament will consider changes in religion law tomorrow

Link to full text in Russian:

https://www.ng.ru/editorial/2020-09-20/2_7968_editorial.html

On 22 September, the State Duma will consider on first reading amendments to the law “On freedom of conscience and religious association,” submitted by the government. The document has received contradictory reviews already in the stage of discussion. Some in the State Duma consider that the new rules will permit shielding citizens from extremism and improve the effectiveness of monitoring religious life.

Continue reading...

19.09.20 – Russian Bible Society feels harassed

Link to full text in Russian: <https://credo.press/233056/>

The head of the council of the Chertanovo Central district of Moscow sent to the Russian Bible Society on 16 September an order by 21 September (that is, in five days) “to carry out independently the demolition of objects” located on a plot of land rented by the society.

Continue reading...

19.09.20 – Bible under threat

Link to full text in Russian: <http://rbo.ru/news/show/?894>

In the midst of the quarantine, the Russian Bible Society received a notification from the government of Moscow that our warehouses, in which about 150,000 books of Sacred Scripture are stored, will soon be demolished.

Continue reading...

18.09.20 – Russian religions oppose changes in religion law

Link to full text in Russian: <https://vz.ru/society/2020/9/18/458782.html>

Next week will begin in the State Duma a consideration of

amendments in the law “On freedom of conscience,” which, in the opinion of their initiators will prevent the appearance in Russia of religious extremists and protect the country from “religious neocolonialism.”

Continue reading...

17.09.20 – Russian parliament considering changes in religion law

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://yandex.com/turbo/vz.ru/s/news/2020/9/17/1060894.html>

“We understand that the amendments are aimed, in the first place, at combating extremism and terrorism on religious grounds, but the struggle with extremism and terrorism should be conducted without causing damage to confessions that are traditional for Russia.”

Continue reading...

17.09.20 – Appeals court frees Jehovah’s Witness while retaining restrictions on activity

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4493822>

The Penza oblast court mitigated the sentence for Penza resident Vladimir Alushkin, who was found guilty in December of last year of organizing an extremist religious congregation. According to the account of the investigation, Alushkin and his five supporters created in Penza the “Arbekovo. Penza” religious organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses (considered extremist and banned in the R.F.).

Continue reading...

17.09.20 – Jehovah’s Witness held accountable for long past alleged indiscretions

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://rostof.ru/articles/v-rostove-za-pedofiliyu-osudili-svidetelya-iegovy>

A resident of Rostov was found guilty of crimes against the sexual inviolability of minors and of participation in the activity of an extremist organization, the press service of the S.K.R.

Continue reading...

16.09.20 – The appeal filed in the City of Penza reversed the prison sentence for Vladimir Alushkin. Six believers received a suspended sentence.

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://jw-russia.org/news/2020/09/7.html>

September 16, 2020 Penza Regional Court commuted the sentence of Vladimir Alushkin, replacing 6 years in prison with 4 years of suspended sentence.

Continue reading...

RUSSIA: Special bimonthly FORB Digest (02-15.09.2020)

15.09.20 – Danish Jehovah's Witness returned to punishment cell

Link to full text in Russian:
www.zaprava.ru/svidetelya-iegovy-dennisa-kristensena-snova-otp

ravili-v-shizo-2/

The Jehovah's Witness (organization ruled to be extremist in R.F.) Dennis Christensen, who was convicted of extremism and is serving his punishment in the Lgov correctional penal colony No. 3 (Kursk oblast), was again put into the punishment cell (Shtrafnoi IZoliator–ShIZO).

Continue reading...

11.09.20 – In the city of Primorye, the trial of a 72-year-old believer is drawing to a conclusion. Being disabled, she commutes to court hearings using her crutches

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://jw-russia.org/news/2020/09/6.html>

Lyudmila Shut from Razdolnoye village (Primorye Territory) is being tried for her faith under the article on participation in the extremist organization's activities.

Continue reading...

10.09.20 – Court recommends excommunication of conservative Orthodox monk

Link to full text in Russian:
www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=dujour&div=447

The court of the Ekaterinburg diocese on Thursday adopted the decision to send a recommendation concerning expulsion from the church of schema monk Sergius Romanov, who has been stripped of his clerical status, Archpriest Nikolai Maleta, chairman of the court, told journalists.

Continue reading...

10.09.20 – A believer from Beryozovsky, was handed a two and a half year suspended sentence for participating in meetings with fellow believers

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://jw-russia.org/news/2020/09/5.html>

On September 10, 2020, the Berezovsky City Court of Kemerovo region handed a guilty verdict to Hasan Kogut, a 37-year-old father of a minor child.

Continue reading...

09.09.20 – Controversy about takeover of movie house by Siberian protestants

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://www.kem.kp.ru/daily/author/816428/>

On social networks a stormy discussion is under way: what will be in the movie theatre “Sibir”? According to unofficial information, a church will be here.

Continue reading...

08.09.20 – Jehovah’s Witness jailed for fear he might mess up investigation

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://www.zaprava.ru/v-severske-vzyat-pod-strazhu-50-letnij-svidtel-iegovy/>

The Seversk city court of Tomsk oblast ordered to take into custody the fifty-year-old Jehovah’s Witness (the organization is considered extremist in the R.F.) Evgeny Korotun. As the website of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia reports, the believer was taken into custody at yesterday’s judicial session.

Continue reading...

07.09.20 – Attorneys mobilize to defend rights of religious groups

Link to full text in Russian:
http://www.sclj.ru/news/list.php?SECTION_ID=415

In late August 2020, lawyers and experts visited Krasnodar territory, which is the second region within the context of the Svoboda28 project organized by the Slavic Legal Center along with the Institute of the Rule of Law, with informational support of the publication Religia i Pravo and the SPEKTR News Bureau.

Continue reading...

05.09.20 – Prosecutor frustrates hope for freedom for Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://kursk-izvestia.ru/news/160486/>

Materials of the criminal case have been sent for a new review in Lgov district court with a different composition. We recall that earlier the Zheleznodorozhny district court in the city of Orel found Dennis Christensen guilty of arranging the activity of the religious congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (activity forbidden in Russia).

Continue reading...

05.09.20 – Court in Kursk leaves Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen in penal colony.

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://vestivrn.ru/news/2020/09/04/zaderzhannykh-za-ekstremizm-svidetelei-iegovy-ostavili-v-voronezhskom-sizo-do-dekabrya/>

The Lenin district court extended the detention of eight Jehovah's Witnesses by three months; they were arrested in July on suspicion of extremism. Members of the organization, including leaders in the main, will remain in the SIZO [pretrial investigation cell] at least until 3 December. This was explained for a Vesti Voronezh correspondent in the press service of the court.

Continue reading...

04.09.20 – Long pretrial detention of Voronezh Jehovah's Witnesses

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4481721>

The Lenin district court of Voronezh extended the detention of eight local members of the Jehovah's Witnesses (an organization ruled to be extremist in the R.F.). As "De Facto Voronezh" reports, for two believers the measure of restriction was extended until 2 December and for six, until the third.

Continue reading...

04.09.20 – Novozybkov Court sentenced 4 Jehovah's Witnesses to jail, but released them because they have already served their time

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://jw-russia.org/news/2020/09/3.html>

On September 3, 2020, the Novozybkov City Court sentenced Vladimir Khokhlov and Eduard Zhinzhikov to 1 year and 3 months of imprisonment and 1 year of restraint, and Tatyana Shamsheva and Olga Silaeva to 1 year of imprisonment and 6 months of restraint.

Continue reading...

02.09.20 – Two Jehovah's Witnesses given four years prison time

Link to full text in Russian: <https://tayga.info/158978>

A court sentenced two Jehovah's Witnesses in Kuzbass to four years in a prison colony for participation in the activity of an extremist organization. One of the believers is an invalid, second class.

Continue reading...

Opposition to Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia: Legal measures

Vilnius University seminar

Jehovah's Witnesses and Their Opponents: Russia, the West, and Beyond

3 September 2020

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (03.09.2020) – As of 15 August, 44 Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison in Russia: 10 had been convicted and 34 were in pretrial detention. Additionally, 173 Jehovah's Witnesses were under orders forbidding them from leaving their hometown and 379 were under criminal investigation. These individuals ranged in age from 19 to 90 years old.

Why are so many Jehovah's Witnesses being put behind bars in Russia? Worldwide, they are known to be law abiding citizens and to be non-violent. They may be imprisoned as conscientious objectors to military service or for their proselytizing

activities in some countries, but this is not the case in Russia.

In Russia, they are accused of being **extremists**. Since April 2017, when the movement was banned by the Supreme Court, 1107 of their homes have been raided, including 310 in 2020. These raids have continued even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dennis Christensen, a 46-year-old **Danish citizen** living in the Russian town of Oryol, was the **first Jehovah's Witness to be arrested** a few weeks after the ban. He was placed in pre-trial detention for a long period before being sentenced to **six years in prison**.

The acceleration and intensification of the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia started with **the ban of their movement on 20 April 2017 on grounds of alleged extremism**.

The ban on grounds of extremism

On that day, Russia's Supreme Court ruled that **the Jehovah's Witnesses' national headquarters in St Petersburg and all local branches were "extremist", and thus should be closed and immediately stop all activities**. Additionally, the Supreme Court ordered all of their property to be seized by the state.

The Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre appealed the decision but, on 17 July 2017, Russia's Supreme Court upheld

its earlier ruling to liquidate the Administrative Centre and its 395 local legal entities, as well as to ban all activities and seize all properties. It is estimated that these properties are worth over 125 million USD.

The ruling immediately entered into force but although it did not, **in theory**, suppress the freedom of worship of Jehovah's Witnesses, their religious activities carried out either individually or collectively were afterwards labelled '**extremist**' and **criminalised in practice**. The arrest and lengthy prison sentencing of Dennis Christensen was a strong warning to Jehovah's Witnesses and the international human rights community: **the law would be strictly and firmly implemented**.

Dennis Christensen, six years in prison

After nearly a year-long criminal trial with over **50 court appearances**, Dennis Christensen was sentenced to **six years' imprisonment for allegedly "organizing extremist activities of a banned organization"**. The Oryol community of Dennis Christensen was specifically targeted because the Oryol Regional Court had previously ruled their group to be "**extremist**".

On 23 June 2020, Christensen was granted parole after serving half of his prison sentence. However, the Kursk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office blocked his release request. The prison authorities then placed Christensen in a punishment cell for ten days for alleged minor violations of prison rules despite his poor health. **He is still in prison right now.**

The accusations of extremism

The accusations of extremism against Jehovah's Witnesses are not new.

According to statistics from Russia's Justice Ministry, during the period 2007-2017 local courts had banned **at least eight Jehovah's Witnesses organizations** on the basis of the 2002 law against extremism, as well as **95 pieces of Jehovah's Witnesses' literature**. In most cases where publications were deemed extremist, the justification was that this literature allegedly claimed their interpretation of the Bible was superior to other Christian religions. This was considered a sign of extremism.

Extremism without violence

A turning point in Russia's anti-extremism strategy was when **an amendment was passed in 2006 that removed the necessity for violators of the law to be associated with violence or calls to violence**.

This amendment to the anti-extremism law opened the door to arbitrary and unrestrained interpretations of the concept of extremism. It has led to the criminalisation of freedom of thought, expression, worship, and assembly, as well as to police raids, fabricated charges, arrests and sentencing of members of peaceful groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses.

The emergence of the concept of 'spiritual security'

The persecution of non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin, or without **"historical" roots** in Russia, is based on the political philosophy of **"spiritual security"**. This concept is promoted by the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church with the support of far-right nationalist, xenophobic and anti-American movements.

In his 2000 National Security Concept, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that "protection of the cultural, spiritual and moral legacy, historical traditions and the norms of social life" was a matter of national security. He also argued for "a state policy to maintain the population's spiritual and moral welfare, and to counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries".

The developments that ensued soon stifled the principles of liberalism established in the very first years of the post-Soviet period.

The progressive 1990 Law on Freedom of Worship adopted by Russia under President Mikhail Gorbachev attracted large numbers of American and European Protestant missionaries who believed that the former Soviet Union would be a vast new territory for missionary work. This development raised the wrath of the Russian Orthodox Church.

A new law was necessary to end the perceived "invasion" by Protestant and other American "cults" who were portrayed by

the Russian Orthodox Church as threatening the national identity. To this end, the Orthodox Church and the anti-cult movement led by **Alexander Dvorkin** intensely lobbied the Russian Parliament. They mobilised conservative segments of society to replace the liberal 1990 law with a new one aligning with their agenda. They won this first legal battle when President Boris Yeltsin passed the **1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which differentiated between traditional and non-traditional religions in Russia.**

Since then, the concept of “spiritual security” as part of national security has been developed and instrumentalised by the ruling authorities and the judiciary to restrict the rights of non-Orthodox religious minorities of foreign origin and to criminalise their beliefs, teachings, religious publications and peaceful activities .

The spiritual security concept and the scapegoating of “foreign agents”

However, the notion of “spiritual security” is part of a much broader security context in Russia.

On 20 July 2012, Putin signed a bill into law that required independent groups to register as **“foreign agents”** if they received any foreign funding and engaged in “political activity”.

Consequently, Russian NGOs and Russia-based NGOs that received funding from the European Union (EU), the United States (US),

and American or European foundations were infamously labelled “foreign agents” by Moscow. This law was justified by the assertion that so-called “foreign agents” are a threat to the Russian identity, national Orthodox values, social and religious cohesion and national security.

The label “foreign agent” breathed new life into the old Soviet accusation of espionage that still finds hold in the minds of the older Russian generation and acts as **a synonym for “spy” or “traitor”**.

In this context of ‘foreign agent’ hunting, Jehovah’s Witnesses, a movement coming from the United States and having its headquarters in that country, became a priority target as they spread on historically canonical Slavic lands with a theology challenging the message of the Orthodox Church.

In the meantime, the amended anti-extremism laws had been purged from its fundamental element of violence and could be used against them.

The Russian Orthodox Church united with the Kremlin against Jehovah’s Witnesses

In all of the Russian Orthodox Church’s press releases concerning the 2017 ban and subsequent arrests of Jehovah’s Witnesses, the egregious violations of religious freedom or misuse of the anti-extremism legislation has **never been raised as such**. In fact, it’s been the opposite, with the Church publicly announcing its support of the ban.

On 20 April 2017, Interfax-Religion titled a press release: "Russian Supreme Court declares Russian branch of Jehovah's Witnesses extremist organization, orders its closure".

On 2 May 2017, Interfax-Religion confirmed the position of the Church with a press release titled: "Russian Orthodox Church supports ban on Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia".

On 13 February 2019, the Russian Orthodox Church reiterated its full support for the ban with a press release titled: "Russian courts' ban on Jehovah's Witnesses founded – Justice Ministry".

The destructive role of Alexander Dvorkin and his anti-cult organisations

The banning of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia was a great victory for Orthodox anti-cult organisations and, in particular, **Alexander Dvorkin** who is the main and emblematic **anti-cult crusader** in Russia.

After returning in the early 1990s to Russia from the US where he was influenced by the American anti-cult movement, Dvorkin has been fighting against Jehovah's Witnesses for over two decades. His stance aligns with Orthodox values dear to Patriarch Kirill and the spiritual security concept dear to President Putin. Dvorkin was outspoken about this perceived victory in RIA Novosti news and on the TV Channel Sputnik a

few weeks after the decision.

Conclusions

The fight for religious freedom in Russia has a long way to go. The US is leading the way by exposing President Putin's persecution agenda against Jehovah's Witnesses and other so-called "non-historical" religious movements. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has made a number of recommendations to the US government calling for **sanctions that include the Russian anti-cult movement and their mentor, Alexander Dvorkin, but also the FECRIS international anti-cult movement he has been the vice-president of for years.**

The EU has its own system of targeted sanctions that could be activated. The United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy and other democratic countries have mechanisms designed to defend freedom of religion or belief around the world and to adopt sanctions, if necessary.

Lastly, Jehovah's Witnesses themselves defend the right to freedom of religion for their members in Russian courts, at the European Court of Human Rights, the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. This movement survived Nazi ideology. It survived 70 years of Communism in Russia. It is safe to assume that it will also survive the persecution of Putin's regime **backed by the Russian Orthodox Church and Dvorkin**, but it will be a long battle.