

Belarus: Preventing the extradition of a Jehovah's Witness to Russia (2020)



Nikolay Andreyevich Makhlichev (© Jehovah's Witnesses)

Nikolay Andreyevich Makhlichev, a Russian citizen born on 1 July 1984 in the city of Cherepovets (Vologda Region), was arrested and detained in the Republic of Belarus on 21 February 2020. He was released in early April 2020.

On 31 January 2019, he was charged under Article 282.2(1) of the Russian Criminal Code: “Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation that has been liquidated or banned by a court due to connections with the carrying out of extremist activity.” The movement of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia has been banned since 2017 and so this article criminalises any related activities by its members.

Since 2017, Russian authorities have been actively searching for Makhlichev. Russian police conducted searches at his registered residence, but he had already relocated to another part of Russia. In May 2019, they placed him on the wanted list in an effort to arrest him.

In February 2020, Makhlichev drove to Belarus with three other people. He was arrested and detained upon crossing the border when his car was stopped by a government automobile inspectorate. During the passport check, the officials discovered that he was wanted in Russia.

The border guards did not return his passport and informed him he would be detained until Russian authorities responded. The Republic of Belarus' prosecutor's office was notified that Makhlichev had been detained and that he was to be held until they receive the necessary documentation from Russia.

On 22 February 2020, Makhlichev, with the assistance of licensed lawyer V. A. Shuplyak, filed an application for asylum in the Republic of Belarus on grounds of religious persecution.

About two months later, he was finally released by the Belarusian authorities.

Between 2017 and 2020, about 250 Russian Jehovah's Witnesses have applied for asylum in Finland.

As of 24 Feb 2020, there were:

35 Jehovah's Witnesses in prison (26 in pretrial detention; 9 convicted and serving time in prison)

25 Jehovah's Witnesses under house arrest

29 Jehovah's Witnesses convicted (9 imprisoned; 8 fined; 12 other restrictions)

Human Rights Without Frontiers in Brussels and *Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe* (FOREF) in Vienna campaigned for his release.