

Seminar

“Jehovah’s Witnesses and Their Opponents: Russia, the West, and Beyond”

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Opposition to Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia: Legal Measures

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As of 15 August, 44 Jehovah’s Witnesses were in prison in Russia: 10 had been convicted and 34 were in pretrial detention. While 173 were not allowed to leave their hometown, 379 were under criminal investigation, ranging in age from 19 to 90 years old.

Why are so many Jehovah’s Witnesses put behind bars in Russia? All over the world, they are known to be law abiding citizens, to be taught to pay their taxes and to be non-violent. They may be put in prison 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—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 and put in pre-trial detention for a long period before being sentenced to six years in prison.

The acceleration and the intensification of the pre-existing persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses started with the ban of their movement on 20 April 2017 on the ground of alleged **extremism**.

The ban on the ground of extremism

On 20 April 2017, Russia's Supreme Court ruled that the Jehovah's Witness national headquarters in St Petersburg and all its local branches were "**extremist**", should be closed down and immediately stop all their activity. Additionally, the Supreme Court ordered all their property to be seized by the state.

The Jehovah's Witness Administrative Center appealed the decision but on 17 July, Russia's Supreme Court upheld its earlier ruling to liquidate as "extremist" the Jehovah's Witness Administrative Centre and its 395 local legal entities, as well as to ban all their activities and to seize all their property, which can be estimated at a minimum of **over 125 million USD**.

The ruling immediately entered legal force, criminalizing any religious activity that Jehovah's Witnesses might have, either individually or collectively. A first strong signal with the arrest and sentence to a heavy prison term of Dennis Christensen was soon sent 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, he was sentenced to six years' imprisonment for "organizing extremist activities of a banned organization." The Oryol community of Jehovah's Witnesses had been 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 but the Kursk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office blocked his release request. The prison authorities soon placed Christensen in a punishment cell for ten days despite his poor health for alleged minor violations of prison rules. 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 covering the period 2007-2017, local courts have abusively banned at least eight local Jehovah's Witnesses organizations on the basis of the 2002 law against extremism, and 95 pieces of Jehovah's Witnesses' literature have been registered as extremist material. In most cases the justification was that in their publications, they were allegedly claiming that 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 the year 2006 when the anti-extremism law was amended, removing the necessity for the alleged violators to be associated with violence or calls to violence.

The amendment to the law opened the door to arbitrary and unrestrained interpretations of the concept of extremism unrelated to violence, to the criminalization of freedom of thought, expression, worship, and assembly, 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' rooting in Russia, is based on the political philosophy of 'spiritual security' which 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*, 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 and he 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 very liberal 1990 Law on Freedom of Worship adopted by Russia under President Mikhail Gorbachev attracted large numbers of American and European Protestant missionaries believing that the former Soviet Union was to be a new vast missionary territory for them. This development raised the wrath of the Russian Orthodox Church.

A new law was necessary to put a halt to the perceived invasion of the Russian Orthodox lands by Protestant and other American 'cults' and to the threatened crumbling of the nation's identity. To this end, the Russian Orthodox Church and the anti-cult movement with Dvorkin intensely lobbied the Russian Parliament and mobilized conservative segments of society to have the very liberal 1990 law replaced by a new one corresponding to their own agenda. They won this first battle when in this atmosphere President Boris Yeltsin passed the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, differentiating traditional and non-traditional religions in Russia.

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

The spiritual security concept and the scapegoating of "foreign agents"

The spiritual security concept is however part of a much broader security context.

On 20 July 2012, Putin signed into law a bill introduced earlier that month by his ruling party that required independent groups to register as "foreign agents" if they received any foreign funding and engaged in "political activity."

Very quickly, Russian NGOs and Russia-based NGOs which received funding from the EU, the United States, and American or European foundations were infamously labelled 'foreign agents' by Moscow as they were perceived as a threat to the Russian identity, national Orthodox values, social and religious cohesion and last but not least national security.

This 'foreign agent' stigmatization revived the old Soviet accusation of espionage that still finds some echo in the minds of the older Russian generation and sounds as a synonym of "spy" or "traitor".

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

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

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

In any of its press releases concerning the ban and the subsequent arrests of Jehovah’s Witnesses has the Russian Orthodox Church ever condemned the egregious violation of their religious freedom or the misuse of the anti-extremism legislation.

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 entitled “Russian Orthodox Church supports ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia”:

On 13 February 2019, the Russian Orthodox Church reiterated its full and unambiguous support to 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 organizations

The banning of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia was a great victory for the Orthodox anti-cult organizations, in particular for Alexander Dvorkin, the main and emblematic anti-cult crusader in Russia. For more than two decades, after coming back home from the United States, where he had been influenced by the anti-cult movement, he had been fighting against Jehovah’s Witnesses in the name of the Orthodox values dear to Patriarch Kirill and of the spiritual security concept dear to Vladimir Putin. He claimed victory in RIA Novosti and on the TV Channel Sputnik a few weeks after the decision.

Conclusions

The fight for religious freedom in Russia will be a long one. The United States are showing the way: exposing President Putin’s persecution agenda about Jehovah’s Witnesses and other so-called non-historical religious movements. USCIRF has made a number of recommendations to the U.S. government 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 can be activated appropriately. The UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy and other democratic countries have mechanisms meant to defend freedom of religion or belief around the world and to adopt sanctions, if necessary.

Jehovah's Witnesses themselves defend the right to freedom of religion of their members in Russian courts, at the European Court of Human Rights, at the UN and the OSCE. They have survived the Nazi ideology. They have survived 70 years of Communism in Russia. For sure, they will also survive the persecution of Putin's regime along with the Russian Orthodox Church and Dvorkin but it will be a long battle.