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## **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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**ABSTRACT:** Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia have faced increasing hostility from the State and the Russian Orthodox Church since the late 1990's, as legislation designed to safeguard the country against violent extremist ideologies and terrorism has instead been instrumentalised to persecute peaceful 'non-traditional' religious minorities. For years, Jehovah's Witnesses have been stigmatised and cast as a threat to the Russian national and religious identity. Now controversial legislative changes have allowed for Jehovah's Witnesses to be labelled 'extremist', and formally prosecuted on the grounds of amended anti-extremism laws. This paper highlights the central position of Putin's political concept of 'spiritual security' which in the last 20 years has driven the legal dynamic leading to the criminalization of the legitimate exercise of the right to religious practices. It exposes the common agenda of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian anti-cult movement led by Alexander Dvorkin and the Russian government aiming at the elimination of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities. It analyzes the successive laws adopted to this end by the Russian parliament under pressure of these actors. It documents the alarming escalation of human rights violations against Jehovah's Witnesses, which range from arrests, administrative fines, pretrial detention and sentences to prison terms, to the legal ban and seizures of all their property. It concludes with some encouraging signs of advocacy coming from the US government and some faith in the capacity of Jehovah's Witnesses to survive this repression.

As of 15 August 2020, 44 Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison in Russia: 10 had been convicted and 34 were being held 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, 1,107 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 over 600 days 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 15 March 2017, Russia's Justice Ministry submitted a case to the Supreme Court arguing that the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses was an 'extremist' organisation, and so should be liquidated and all activities banned. The first hearing took place on 5 April 2017.

The threat of a complete ban quickly received widespread condemnation across the globe. Among many others, it is worth mentioning the joint support of several UN Special Rapporteurs: David Kaye (USA), the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression; Maina Kiai (Kenya), the Special Rapporteur on freedoms of peaceful assembly and of association; and Ahmed Shaheed (the Maldives), the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (OHCHR 2017).

However, despite the numerous interventions of international human rights actors, Russia's Supreme Court ruled on 20 April 2017 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 (Jehovah's Witnesses n.d.). Additionally, the Supreme Court ordered all their property to be seized by the state.

The decision was appealed but, on 17 July 2017, Russia's Supreme Court upheld its earlier ruling to liquidate the Jehovah's Witness 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.

According to figures that the Communication Department of the Watch Tower Headquarters in New York kindly provided me with, their evaluation of the losses can be sub-divided as follows:

Properties owned by foreign entities

- Total number of properties and their collective value – 208 properties, including the branch in Solnechnoe which includes the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania (WTPA) properties. Their total value is 3,314,663,990 rubles which is 46,372,149 USD.
- Number of properties already confiscated and their collective value – 91 properties, including the branch in Solnechnoe (WTPA properties). Their total value is 2,316,163,236 rubles which is 32,403,123 USD.

List of the foreign entities and countries involved – 9 in total:

- o Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania,
- o Jehovah’s Witnesses of Sweden,
- o Jehovah’s Witnesses of Austria,
- o Jehovah’s Witnesses of Finland,
- o Jehovah’s Witnesses of the Netherlands,
- o Jehovah’s Witnesses of Spain,
- o Jehovah’s Witnesses of Norway,
- o Jehovah’s Witnesses of Denmark,
- o and Jehovah’s Witnesses of Portugal.

Properties owned in Russia

- Total number of properties and their collective value – 159 properties, including 2 small buildings on the premises of the Solnechny branch that were the administrative centre. Their total value is 1,391,956,047 rubles which is 19,473,465 USD.
- Number of properties already confiscated and their collective value – 121 properties, including 2 small buildings on the premises of the Solnechny branch. Their total value is 1,219,296,672 rubles which is 17,057,960 USD.

Properties owned in Crimea

- Total number of properties and their collective value – 32 properties. Their total value is 288,186,704 rubles which is 4,031,731 USD.
- Number of properties already confiscated and their collective value – 24 properties. Their total value is 225,221,225 rubles which is 3,150,844 USD.

The ruling immediately came into force. Although in theory this decision did not suppress the freedom of worship for Jehovah’s Witnesses, afterwards, all their religious activities were 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.

In May 2017, Dennis Christensen and other co-religionists were arrested during a raid by police and Federal Security Service (FSB) agents, while they were having a Bible study meeting in Oryol. Dennis Christensen is a citizen of an EU country, Denmark, who is married to a Russian woman and lives in Russia.

### ***Dennis Christensen, six years in prison***

On 25 May 2017, heavily armed police officers and agents of the FSB disrupted a peaceful weekly religious service of Jehovah's Witnesses. The authorities took about 20 people into custody and held them overnight, including Dennis Christensen.

After nearly a year-long criminal trial with over 50 court appearances, he was sentenced to six years' imprisonment under Article 282.2(1) of the Criminal Code: 'Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity'. The Oryol community of Jehovah's Witnesses was specifically targeted because the Oryol Regional Court had previously determined their group to be 'extremist' (Arnold 2017).

On 30 January 2019, the prosecution demanded Christensen be sentenced to six and a half years for 'continuing the activities' of an extremist group. On 6 February 2019, after having been in pretrial detention for over 600 days, Christensen was sentenced to six years imprisonment in a penal colony. On 23 May 2019, the Oryol Regional Court denied his appeal and upheld its February decision.

The international community was quick to react, condemning his sentence and demanding his immediate release, in particular the United Nations (UN) (OHCHR 2019), the European Union (EU) (EEAS Press Team 2020), and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) (USCIRF 2019).

On 23 June 2020, Christensen was granted parole after serving half of his prison sentence. However, Aleksei Shatunov of the Kursk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office filed an appeal demanding that the court ruling be overturned. The appeal was based on false reports that Christensen did not have a record of good behaviour while in prison. His parole was denied and the prison authorities placed him in a punishment cell for ten days despite his poor health. At the time of

writing, Christensen was still in prison, waiting for a new hearing to be scheduled, which could take several months.

Russia's choice of their first victim under this repressive legislation was a clear challenge designed to test the reaction of the international community, especially the EU since Christensen is not a Russian citizen but a foreign national from Denmark. This was a cunning political and geo-political strategy.

### ***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 from 2007 to 2017, Human Rights Watch discovered that local courts had banned at least eight local Jehovah's Witnesses organisations and had placed 95 pieces of Jehovah's Witnesses' literature on the federal registry of banned extremist materials (HRW 2017). In most of the cases where publications were banned, the justification was that there were, allegedly, claims that their interpretation of the Bible was superior to other Christian religions. This was considered a sign of extremism.

Supporting this research, an employee of the press service of the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, Ivan Belenko, said in an interview with Kommersant on 17 March 2017 that a number of their publications had been included in the Federal List of Extremism Materials of the Justice Ministry. He added that in one year there were 46 incidents of 'extremist' material being planted by the police in Jehovah's Witnesses' houses of worship throughout Russia, some of them being filmed by their own surveillance cameras during the raids (Kommersant 2017).

In an article titled *Russian Supreme Court asked to find Jehovah's Witnesses extremist organization* published on 16 March 2017, RAPSI, a Russian legal information agency, enumerates a series of extremism cases going back to 2013 (RAPSI 2017).

### ***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.

The amended legislation was criticised by the UN Human Rights Committee on 28 April 2015 (UN Human Rights Committee 2015), the Parliamentary

Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Monitoring Committee in Resolution 1896 on 2 October 2012 (PACE 2012), and the Venice Commission in June 2012 (Venice Commission 2012). All of these actors called on Russia to correct the law so as to require an element of violence or hatred. Their voices were not heard by Moscow.

This change in Russia's anti-extremism legislation opened the door to arbitrary and unrestrained interpretations of the concept of extremism; the criminalisation of freedom of thought, expression, worship, and assembly; and 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'.

This spiritual dimension of national security first emerged in post-Soviet Russia with the *Law of the Russian Federation on Security No. 2446-1* of 5 March 1992. The first article of the law placed emphasis on the importance of 'spiritual values'. In 1992, this indicated the end of the Soviet militant atheism and the state persecution of Orthodox and other believers.

However, 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 would be a vast new missionary territory (Witte and Bourdeaux, 1999). This development incurred the wrath of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 1996, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad commented on the issues facing the Russian Orthodox Church from this proselytism. He contended that American and European Evangelical and Pentecostal proselytizing groups did not aid the Russian Orthodox Church in its re-evangelization of people deeply marked by seven decades of Marxist-Leninist atheism. He contended that instead they operated against it, 'like boxers in a ring with their pumped-up muscles, delivering blows' (Payne 2010). This perceived 'attack' was framed as being against Russia's national and religious values. In turn, the population developed and adopted the idea that 'non-Orthodox' is defined as those who attempt to dismantle and destroy their spiritual unity and their Orthodox faith. Over time, the 'non-Orthodox' became perceived as 'spiritual colonizers who by fair or foul means try to tear the people away from their church' (Payne 2010).

A new law was necessary to put a halt to the perceived invasion of Russian Orthodox lands by Protestant and other American 'cults', which were alleged threats to the nation's identity. To this end, the Russian Orthodox Church and the anti-cult movement led by Alexander Dvorkin intensely lobbied the Russian Parliament and mobilised conservative segments of society to replace the 1990 law with one aligned with their agenda. They won this first 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 (Payne 2010).

The 1997 Law swiftly put an end to the brief period of religious freedom that Russia had just experienced. The 1997 Law, as well as the ideological position and policies which were later adopted by the Russian authorities, were all inspired by the desire to protect the nation against foreign proselytizing movements and to ensure the 'spiritual security' of Russia through the purported role of the Russian Orthodox Church in safeguarding national values and security. This marked the very beginning of the spiritual protectionism of 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 minorities of foreign origin and to criminalise their beliefs, teachings, religious publications and peaceful activities as extremist.

Such allegations progressively and increasingly were included in the Federal Law on Counteraction of Extremist Activities that was passed on 25 July 2002. Also known as the anti-extremism law, it was amended in 2006 to eliminate the requirement of violence and consequently allowed for the prosecution of non-violent religious groups (Venice Commission 2012).

## ***The spiritual security concept and the scapegoating of ‘foreign agents’***

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

On 20 July 2012, Putin signed a bill into law that was introduced earlier in the month by his ruling party. This new law requires independent groups to register as ‘foreign agents’ if they receive any foreign funding or engage in ‘political activity’. The law, *On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent*, requires non-profit organisations that receive foreign donations and engage in ‘political activity’ to register and declare themselves as ‘foreign agents’. This term was vaguely defined and has proven susceptible to misuse and abuse.

Due to this new legislation, Russian NGOs and Russia-based NGOs that receive funding from the EU, the United States (US), and American or European foundations became infamously labelled ‘foreign agents.’ They were officially perceived as a threat to the Russian identity, national Orthodox values, social and religious cohesion and, last but not least, national security.

The label ‘foreign agent’ revived 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’. The manipulation of this socio-psychological reflex is part of the ‘spiritual security’ ideology that underpins the various forms of increasing persecutions of non-Orthodox religious groups across the country.

Within this context of hunting ‘foreign agents’, Jehovah’s Witnesses became a priority target as they spread a theology challenging the message of the Orthodox Church on historically canonical Slavic lands, proselytizing atheists and Orthodox believers. This foreign movement originates from the US and has its headquarters there, which, since the Bolshevik revolution, has been the main enemy of Moscow. Additionally, it is a movement with the capacity to fight for its rights through international human rights organisations and the European Court of Human Rights.

Accordingly, the eradication of Jehovah’s Witnesses was an urgent and unnegotiable priority.

Nowadays, other religious denominations in Russia, such as Protestant churches and the Catholic Church, are also on the radar of those enforcing the spiritual security concept. A bill presented by the Russian government on 22 July 2019 to

the Russian parliament would forbid foreigners from participating in Russian religious associations' activities much less guide them (Rozanskij 2020). In addition to foreigners, the proposed ban on participating and leading communities would include people classified as 'extremists' and terrorists, according to official lists of the State Revisers Bureau. Moreover, the proposed ban also applies to believers whose actions the court deems to show 'signs of extremist activity'. For some years now, Jehovah's Witnesses, various groups of Baptist Christians and other religious minorities have been included in this list. This ban would create difficulties for Muslim preachers and Protestant pastors, as well as Catholic priests, among whom there are still many foreign missionaries struggling to obtain or renew their residence permits.

This bill follows the logic of the neutralisation of 'foreign agents' strategy and 'the spiritual security concept'. These ideologies seek to eliminate a number of religious groups of 'foreign origin' which are perceived as threatening the Russian Orthodox Church, or outside of the control of other state-sanctioned religions.

Lastly, the spiritual security concept, which is both protectionist and xenophobic, is not only designed to build a cultural Iron Curtain around Russia but also to be exported to 'Orthodox lands' inside the EU.

### ***The Russian Orthodox Church united with the Kremlin against Jehovah's Witnesses***

In all of the Russian Orthodox Church's press releases concerning the ban and the subsequent arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses, it has never condemned the egregious violation of religious freedom or the misuse of the anti-extremism legislation.

All the press releases of the Russian Orthodox Interfax-Religion agency have taken a clear stance on the topic. The first two official reactions of the Russian Orthodox Church were as follows:

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

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*. It stated that:

The Russian Orthodox Church sees *Jehovah's Witnesses* as a dangerous sect and has supported the ban imposed on it in Russia.

‘This is a sect, totalitarian and harmful at that. I am well aware of this because I have had an opportunity to speak to former adepts of this sect more than once’, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Synodal Department for External Church Relations, told a program shown on the *Rossiya 24* (VGTRK) TV channel.

*Jehovah's Witnesses* members are dangerous because they approach people in the street and offer them their literature, introduce themselves as a Christian organization, while their activities are based ‘on manipulating consciousness, and they erode the psyche of people and the family’, the metropolitan said.

In addition to that, adherents of *Jehovah's Witnesses* ‘warp the teachings of Christ and misinterpret the Gospel’, he said.

‘Their doctrine contains a lot of false teachings. They do not believe in Jesus Christ as the God and the Savior. They do not recognize the doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore, they cannot be called Christians’, the metropolitan said.

On April 20, the Russian Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Russian Justice Ministry's lawsuit and designated *Jehovah's Witnesses* as an extremist organization.

Metropolitan Hilarion welcomed this court ruling and suggested that the ‘pernicious and harmful’ influence of *Jehovah's Witnesses* would now start to decline. The Russian Orthodox Church did not take part in proceedings and was not asked for advice, he said (Interfax Religion 2017b).

Then, 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* (Interfax Religion 2019a).

The position of the Russian Orthodox Church concerning the sentencing of Dennis Christensen to six years in prison as well as other Jehovah’s Witnesses being imprisoned was as heartless as could be expected. On 23 May 2019, Interfax-Religion published a laconic press release titled *Oryol court upholds sentence for Danish Jehovah's Witness* in which it said Christensen had been sentenced for organising the activity of a banned extremist religious group (Interfax Religion 2019b).

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

The banning of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia was a great victory for Orthodox anti-cult organisations, in particular for Alexander Dvorkin, the main and emblematic anti-cult crusader in Russia. He claimed victory in RIA Novosti news and on the TV Channel Sputnik a few weeks after the decision (Sputnik News 2017).

For over two decades, after returning home from the US where he had been influenced by the anti-cult movement, Dvorkin 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.

In 1999, Dvorkin testified as an expert in religious studies during a trial about the possible prohibition of activities of the Moscow Jehovah's Witnesses congregation at the Golovinsky Intermunicipal (District) Court of Moscow by the prosecutor's request (Wallace 2001). At that time, this trial had been going on for three weeks and was entirely unprecedented in Russian legal practice as a secular court was being tasked to judge theological issues. A translation of excerpts of the court proceedings was provided to the author by the Communication Department of the Jehovah's Witnesses Headquarters in New York, US. Within this document, titled 'A Heavenly Deliberation / Selections from the transcript of a trial', was a section where the Jehovah's Witnesses' lawyer, Galina Krylova, used the testimony of Nikolai Semyonovich Gordienko (professor in the department of religious studies, Gertsen Memorial Russian State Pedagogical University, doctor of philosophy, honorary professor at the Russian State Pedagogical University of St. Petersburg, author of more than 20 books and pamphlets. Witness for the defense) to contest the legitimacy of Dvorkin's expertise:

*G.A. Krylova:* You are an adherent of Orthodox Christianity. I am holding a copy of your book *Introduction to the Study of Cults*. You discuss cults and those whom you call cultists. You start with Mormons, followed by the Jehovah's Witnesses...You say that you classify sects into two categories and write, 'But, in any case, it must be remembered that both groups come from Satan and, therefore, any cult, whether it openly practices Satanism or not, is essentially satanic'. Don't you think that that statement is insulting to Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons?

*A.L. Dvorkin:* It is a reply to the Jehovah's Witnesses' insults to the Orthodox Church.

*G.A. Krylova:* In this connection, I have a question for witness Gordienko. Speaking as an expert on religion, are witness Dvorkin's statements in

keeping with scholarly representations of that organization and the literature of the Jehovah's Witnesses?

*N.S. Gordienko:* I will say most definitely that they are not. I have heard his presentation, it has no argumentation. If a student of mine gave me an answer like that, I would not accept it. I would give him a very low grade.

*Valery Vasil'evich Borshchev (deputy in the State Duma, vice chairman of the Duma committee on public groups and religious organizations. Witness for the defense.):* I don't see that the Jehovah's Witness incite religious hostility because they think that their teachings are correct and others are mistaken.

Alexander Dvorkin, a witness for the prosecution, states that any sect 'is essentially satanic'. He does not consider his own words incitement of religious enmity, but 'an answer to the insults of the Jehovah's Witnesses against the Orthodox Church.'

That is a characteristic of many religions. Of course, that causes tension in society, but within measure, since they do not encourage discrimination or violence. Not like when Baptist children's Bibles were burned by priests of the Orthodox Church or when Father Oleg Stenyaev burned the books of Lev' Tolstoy and Stanislav Roerich in public. No such facts have been uncovered about the Jehovah's Witnesses.

*G.A. Krylova:* Are you aware of the methods of Father Oleg Stenyaev, who runs a rehabilitation center in Ordynka, or the purported methods of Alexander Dvorkin to help those supposedly suffering under the effects of religious organizations?

*V.V. Borshchev:* Father Oleg Stenyaev has no serious position or method to assist anyone spiritually. It seems to me that he's the one in need of spiritual help. Dvorkin is extremely unscrupulous and, for that reason, I consider it impossible even to have a discussion with him.

Jehovah's Witnesses won this first major case but after this first setback, Dvorkin continued campaigning against cults all over Russia and the former Soviet Republics, spreading defamatory statements. These can be found in his anti-cult book *Totalitarian Sects*, which is a term he allegedly coined. In his book, he wrote the following about Jehovah's Witnesses (Dvorkin 2002):

*Jehovah's Witnesses is a commercial organization:* '... I would call the Watchtower Society a pseudo-religious commercial organization based on

a quasi-communist ideology with elements of paganism and covered by several Christian images and concepts’

*The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses has many similarities with the Communist Party: ‘Of all the totalitarian sects operating in our country, this sect, most of all, even outwardly, resembles the Communist Party. Perhaps that is why it manages to achieve such notable successes throughout the post-Soviet space. The structure of Jehovah's Witnesses is remarkably similar to the structure of the CPSU with its "democratic centralism." Instead of services, Jehovah's Witnesses hold "party meetings," "party lessons" and "party congresses" (annual "Jehovah's Witnesses Congress"). In the eschatological perspective, they expect a very specific earthly paradise (read communism), where there will be a lot of food and little work’.*

*Jehovah's Witnesses hate all other religions, especially other Christian denominations: ‘... The hatred of the Jehovah's lawyers against other denominations and, above all, traditional Christianity is obvious’.*

*The level of mental illness and suicide among Jehovah's Witnesses is much higher than the average: ‘The level of mental illness among Jehovah's Witnesses, studied by various foreign scientists, exceeds the average by 1.5-10 times. Also, the number of suicides among Jehovah's Witnesses is two to three times higher than among non-sect members.’*

Despite his abusive language, which could be considered hate speech and incitement to hatred, Dvorkin garnered respect from Russian political circles and has managed to push forward repressive and discriminatory laws targeting non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin.

Soon, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin viewed Dvorkin as a useful instrument as he was fulfilling their respective and complementary agendas.

His second and main victory came with the final banning of Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2017.

### ***Who is Alexander Dvorkin?***

Alexander Dvorkin was born in Moscow in 1955. On 6 March 1977, he emigrated from the Soviet Union on an Israeli visa. He did not go to Israel but instead went to the US. While in the US, he got baptized in 1980 in an Orthodox Church in New York. In 1984, he received American citizenship. In 1988, he graduated with a Doctor of Philosophy in Medieval Studies with a dissertation titled *Ivan the*

*Terrible as a Religious Type*. In 1992, he returned to a newly independent Russia with many anti-cult ideas to use against enemies of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 1993, he founded the *Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies*, an anti-cult propaganda centre, which was blessed by the then Patriarch Alexey II of the Russian Orthodox Church. It grew into a global network of Orthodox-oriented, anti-cult civic groups and missionary departments of Orthodox dioceses (FECRIS 2012, 278 & 302-304).

The *Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies* is the head centre of the *Russian Association of Centres for Religious and Sectarian Studies* (RATsIRS). Unsurprisingly, Dvorkin is also the president of RATsIRS; the vice-presidents are Archpriest Alexander Novopashin and Archpriest Alexander Shabanov; the executive secretary is priest Lev Semenov, Ph.D., associate professor.

Since 1993, Dvorkin has chaired the *Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies* which later became the Russian member association of FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), an international anti-cult organisation.

Last but not least, Dvorkin has been the vice-president of FECRIS for years. FECRIS was created and is based in France, whose constitution strictly separates state and religions. Oddly enough, FECRIS is heavily financed by French public powers and supposed to be secular, while its Russian member association, which is headed by Alexander Dvorkin, is heavily financed by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Quite recently, the nefarious role of Dvorkin has been recognised by a prestigious US state institution, USCIRF, in its report *The Anti-Cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union*:

By the time the Russian government banned the Jehovah's Witnesses in April 2017, Alexander Dvorkin, a Russian anti-cult activist, had spent years lobbying for strong measures against groups he frequently refers to as 'totalitarian cults' and 'destructive sects'—and the Jehovah's Witnesses were at the top of his list. In an interview with state media shortly after the ban, Dvorkin claimed that the group maintains 'strict control over every aspect of its members' lives, including even the most intimate moments of their family lives as spouses have to report on one another'. Just as in the days of Stalin, 'All members have to keep an eye on each other, to spy on one another', he said. Dvorkin believes that the international human rights community, especially those who advocate for freedom of religion and

belief, enable these destructive organizations to prey on society. According to him, ‘the struggle for human rights is being supplanted with the struggle for the rights of organizations which violate human rights.’ Banning the Jehovah’s Witnesses, to his mind, was not a violation of fundamental freedoms, but rather an essential step for their preservation (Morton 2020).

In its recommendations, USCIRF says among other things that the US government should:

- ‘Publicly censure Alexander Dvorkin and the Saint Irenaeus of Leon Information-Consultation Center (SILIC)) for their ongoing disinformation campaign against religious minorities;
- [and] counter propaganda against new religious movements by the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS) at the annual [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)] Human Dimensions Conference with information about the ongoing involvement of individuals and entities within the anti-cult movement in the suppression of religious freedom’.

Alexander Dvorkin and the *Saint Irenaeus of Leons Center* are now in a good position to fall under the Magnitsky law.

Some years ago, Dvorkin was denied access to a conference about religious freedom organised by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* in the European Parliament because he was planning to disturb the event. With USCIRF’s report, the EU now has an efficient tool to activate its own system of sanctions.

### ***Conclusions***

The objective to eliminate the legal and physical presence of Jehovah’s Witnesses from the Russia dates back to the mid-1990s when the Orthodox Church and the clerical anti-cult movement headed by Alexander Dvorkin began mobilising the public and lobbying the Russian parliament to pass a law granting an inferior legal status, and consequently fewer rights, to ‘non-traditional’ religious movements. The first step towards this agenda occurred in 1997 with the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. The next legislative instruments to be used against Jehovah’s Witnesses were the 2002 Law on Counteraction of Extremist Activities and its amended version in 2006, which removed the criterion of use of or incitement to violence for qualification as ‘extremist’. In 2012, the Law on ‘foreign agents’ indirectly reinforced the state’s policy of hostility towards any foreign influence.

The fight for religious freedom in Russia will be a long one. The US is showing the way by exposing President Putin's persecution agenda towards Jehovah's Witnesses and other so-called non-historical religious movements. USCIRF has made a number of recommendations for sanctions that include the Russian anti-cult movement and its mentor, Alexander Dvorkin, but also FECRIS which 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 for their members in Russian courts, at the European Court of Human Rights, at the UN and at the OSCE. They have survived the Nazi ideology and 70 years of Communism in Russia. They will also survive the persecution of Putin's regime, the Russian Orthodox Church and Dvorkin. But it will be a long and costly battle.

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