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Jehovah's Witnesses and blood transfusion: Analysis of a case raised at the OSCE

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (16.12.2023) - In 2022 and in October 2023, a Kazakh citizen taking part in the annual conference in Warsaw grouping together 57 country delegations of the OSCE Participating States and hundreds of representatives of human rights NGOs made a statement accusing Jehovah's Witnesses of being opposed to blood transfusion, which allegedly led, according to him, to the death from cancer of a four-year old child in 2017. Human Rights Without Frontiers investigated the case with some new sources and brought some new light on the issue.

The medical case

On 30 November 2016, little Victoria Susayeva was admitted to the Kostanay regional hospital in Kazakhstan with suspected appendicitis. During the operation, doctors discovered a solid-sized liver tumor that was "rapidly developing."

Despite the efforts of doctors, there seemed to be no solution in sight. The mother, Natalya Susaeva, who is a Jehovah's Witness, did not sign any consent for a blood transfusion but repeatedly asked the doctors to provide the best treatment with the most available methods.

She then contacted a doctor from the Russian Federation. The Russian oncologist told her that an urgent operation was needed but it could only be performed in a hospital in Chelyabinsk where he was working. A complex liver operation took place on 26 December 2016. Back in Astana (Kazakhstan), further medical treatment was applied to the child, including several sessions of chemotherapy.

Svetlana Glushkova, a journalist who very seriously investigated the case, wrote in an article published by [Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty](#) on 10 August 2017: "From February 27 to March 5 this year, blood transfusion was performed, but there was no obvious improvement."

In the same article, Natalya Susaeva was quoted as saying "Despite the efforts of the doctors, the use of blood transfusions and various medications, everything was unsuccessful."

Another operation was first planned on 27 April but finally postponed to 4 May. However, a tomography revealed that "a space-occupying liver mass appeared over time." The mother then decided to find a solution in another country, India. According to her, there were highly qualified Indian doctors who could help, especially at the Aster CMI Hospital (Bangalore).

Members of the medical team at the National Research Center for Maternal and Infant Health confirmed that they were familiar with the doctors at Aster CMI Hospital and considered them to be highly skilled professionals. On 10 May 2017, Dr. Mustafinov the the attending physician R.S. Utebaliev signed the discharge papers from the Center and signed the permission for Victoria to board the plane, hereby confirming her satisfactory condition to travel.

Unfortunately, the treatment did not bring the desired results. On 16 July 2017, four-year-old Victoria died in India and was cremated there.

Dr. Rajiv Lokhan, a leading hepatology specialist and transplant surgeon said after the operation:

"I believe she (the mother) did everything perfectly. She wanted the best possible care for her child. She was always at her child's bedside throughout the whole treatment, and I never saw Victoria alone without her mother even though I often visited after hours."

And regarding the choice of bloodless treatment options, Dr. Lokhan added: *"The use of blood and blood-containing products in patient care should not be the first choice. There are many medical reasons for this. In the case of Victoria's treatment, the constraint on the use of blood/blood-containing drugs played a very small role. The main determining factor in her death was the aggressive nature of the tumor biology. I sincerely wish we could have done more for Victoria, but the nature of the tumor severely limited potentially effective treatments."*

An opportunity for organizations hostile to Jehovah's Witnesses

The main role in spreading false information about the treatment and death of Victoria Susaeva was played by several organizations belonging to the Association of Legal Entities, "The Association of Religious Research Centers" (ARRC) and especially its head, Yulia Denisenko. (1)

In those years Denisenko positioned herself as a student of Prof. Dvorkin, an extremist Russian Orthodox figure who is well-known for his hate-fueling speeches against religious movements such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical and Protestant Churches, Hare Krishna devotees or Scientologists. For several years, he was also a member of the board of directors of FECRIS, the Federation of anti-cult organizations in Europe until 2023 and its vice-president until 2021.

The public foundation "Association of practicing psychologists of Kostanay region" and its head, Julia Amantaevna Kaliuzhnaya, use Maxim Susaev's help and testimony as a victim of Jehovah's Witnesses and as someone who had lost his daughter "because of religious beliefs" when organizing events in educational institutions and other institutions to this day.

Divorced parents

It should be noted that the mother's desperate fight against the cancer of her daughter took place in the context of a divorce.

Soon after the death of the young Victoria, the father started accusing the mother of not allowing him to see his child, denying proper medical care and refusing blood transfusion without his own consent. Additionally, he declared to RFE/RL that he was not consulted

about the transfer of his daughter to India and he would have been against as it would have also been the case about the cremation in India.

Natalya Susaeva rejected these accusations, saying to RFE/ RL "The child's father did not participate in any way, such as providing funds for the treatments in Russia and India. He never visited the child for a single day while she was undergoing her medical treatment. And in general, he did not take part in the child's life: there was no moral, emotional, or physical support on his part." She provided well documented evidence that neither she nor the medical staff at the facilities where Victoria was staying had never been visited by her father.

And she added "he also did nothing to support their 10-year-old eldest daughter, who lived with her and needed help and attention during that difficult time. Instead, he threatened her in his messages and insulted her religious feelings, she said.

As it is known in divorce cases, each party accuses the other one and has his/her own arguments. The purpose of this article is not to take sides but to rely on non-biased sources.

RFE/ RL is one of them. Another one is the Kazakh judiciary.

Conclusion

A criminal case against Natalia Susaeva was filed based on the statement of Victoria's father under Article 119 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan "Abandonment causing the death by negligence of a person left without assistance." The Department of Internal Affairs of the Kostanay region registered the complaint but the case was dismissed.

Stating that and campaigning against Jehovah's Witnesses on the alleged fact that Victoria Susaeva died because of denial of blood transfusion is therefore a fake news and propaganda hostile towards a global religious minority religious group present in almost 200 countries and territories in the world.

- (1) *Yulia Denisenko* is currently the head of a public foundation in Kyrgyzstan. She presents herself as an expert in the field of extremism prevention and deradicalization. She is not actively involved in Kazakhstan. She worked very closely with several Russian anti-cult organizations such as the Center for Religious Studies Irenaeus of Lyons.
- (2) Public foundation *Association of Practicing Psychologists of Kostanay Region* — the center in Kazakhstan aimed at "fighting cults and helping victims of destructive cults". The Foundation was a member of the ARRC. In cooperation with the Department of Religious Affairs of Kostanay region, it utilizes the funds allocated by the state to officially increase religious literacy among the population and strengthen interdenominational harmony.