**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 15 March 2017, Russia's Justice Ministry submitted a suit to the Supreme Court to declare the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses an "extremist" organisation, order it liquidated, and ban its activity. 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), Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, **Maina Kiai** (Kenya), Special Rapporteur on freedoms of peaceful assembly and of association, and **Ahmed Shaheed** (the Maldives), Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.[[1]](#footnote-1)

However, despite the numerous interventions of international human rights actors, Russia’s Supreme Court ruled on 20 April 2017 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.[[2]](#footnote-2) 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 2017, 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. It is estimated that all these properties across the country are worth over 125 million USD.

According to figures that the Communication Department of the Watch Tower Headquarters in New York kindly accepted to provide me, 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 (properties the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania). Their total value 3 314 663 990 rubles or 46 372 149 $.
* Number of properties already confiscated and their collective value – 91 properties, including the branch in Solnechnoe (properties WTPA). Their total value 2 316 163 236 rubles or 32 403 123 $.

List of the foreign countries involved – 9 foreign entities:

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   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 (Administrative center property). Their total value 1 391 956 047 rubles or 19 473 465 $.
* Number of properties already confiscated and their collective value  – 121 properties, including 2 small buildings on the premises of the Solnechny branch (Administrative center property). Their total value 1 219 296 672 rubles or 17 057 960 $.

Properties owned in Crimea

* Total number of properties and their collective value – 32 properties. Their total value 288 186 704 rubles or 4 031 731 $.
* Number of properties already confiscated and their collective value – 24 properties. Their total value 225 221 225 rubles or 3 150 844 $.

Properties owned in Donetsk and Luhansk

* Total number of properties and their collective value – 66 properties. The cost is unknown.
* Number of properties already confiscated and their collective value – Since litigation is currently taking place, it is not known exactly which ones have already been officially confiscated but they are all considered to be lost.

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.

In May 2017, Dennis Christensen was arrested during a raid of the police and FSB security services along with other co-religionists while they were having a Bible study meeting in Oryol. Dennis Christensen is a citizen of an EU country, Denmark, married to a Russian woman and living in Russia.

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

On 25 May 2017, heavily armed police officers and agents of the Federal Security Services disrupted a peaceful weekly religious service of Jehovah’s Witnesses that he was attending. The authorities held about 20 persons 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 Dennis Christensen had been specifically targeted because the Oryol Regional Court had previously determined their group to be "extremist."[[3]](#footnote-3)

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 and condemn his sentence and to ask for his immediate release, in particular the UN,[[4]](#footnote-4) the EU,[[5]](#footnote-5) the USCIRF[[6]](#footnote-6) and others.

On 23 June 2020, Christensen was [granted parole](https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases-statements/uscirf-applauds-russian-court-s-parole-jehovah-s-witness-dennis) 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 canceled. The appeal was based on false reports that Christensen did not have a good behavior prison record. By the time of writing this research paper, Christensen was still in prison, waiting for a new hearing to be scheduled, which could take several months. The prison authorities soon placed him in a punishment cell for ten days despite his poor health.

The choice of the first victim of the repression was obviously a challenge launched by Russia to test the reaction of the international community, and the EU in particular, as Christensen was not a Russian citizen but was a foreign national from Denmark. A well-thought 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 2007-2017, Human Rights Watch[[7]](#footnote-7) revealed that local courts have banned at least eight local Jehovah’s Witnesses organizations, and 95 pieces of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ literature have been placed on the federal registry of banned extremist materials. In most cases the justification was that in their literature, they were allegedly claiming their interpretation of the Bible was superior to other Christian religions. This was considered a sign of extremism.

Along the same lines, an employee of the press service of the Administrative Center 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 into the Federal List of Extremism Materials of the Justice Ministry. And he added that in one year there were 46 incidents of “extremist” material planting by the police in their houses of worship throughout Russia, some of them being filmed by their own surveillance cameras during the raids.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In an article titled “Russian Supreme Court asked to find Jehovah’s Witness managing organization extremist” published on 16 March 2017, RAPSI, a Russian legal information agency, enumerates a series of extremism cases going back to 2013.[[9]](#footnote-9)

***Extremism without violence***

A turning point in Russia’s anti-extremism strategy was the year 2006 when the relevant law was amended, removing the necessity for violators of the law to be associated with violence or calls to violence.

The amended law was criticized by the UN Human Rights Committee (28 April 2015)[[10]](#footnote-10), the PACE Monitoring Committee of the Council of Europe (Resolution 1896, 2 October 2012)[[11]](#footnote-11), and the Venice Commission (June 2012)[[12]](#footnote-12) which called on Russia to correct the law so it requires an element of violence or hatred. Their voices were not heard by Moscow.

The amendment to the law opened the door to arbitrary and unrestrained interpretations of the concept of extremism, to the criminalisation 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 a ‘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 the *2000 National Security Concept*, the Putin Administration stated:

“Assurance of the Russian Federation’s national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life, and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia’s peoples. There must be a state policy to maintain the population’s spiritual and moral welfare, prohibit the use of airtime to promote violence or base instincts, and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries.”

This spiritual dimension of national security had 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 put an emphasis on the importance of ‘spiritual values’, which

in 1992 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 Mikhaïl Gorbatchev 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.[[13]](#footnote-13) This development raised the wrath of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 1996, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad commented on the problem of proselytism facing the Russian Orthodox Church. He contended that American and European Evangelical and Pentecostal proselytizing groups did not aid the Russian Orthodox Church in its re-evangelization of the people deeply marked by seven decades of Marxist-leninist atheism, but operated against it “like boxers in a ring with their pumped-up muscles, delivering blows.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This perceived ‘attack’ was framed to be against Russia’s national and religious values. In turn, the population developed and adopted the idea that ‘non-Orthodox’ can be defined as those who attempt to dismantle and destroy their spiritual unity and their Orthodox faith, that the ‘non-Orthodox’ are “spiritual colonizers who by fair or foul means try to tear the people away from their church”[[15]](#footnote-15)

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 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.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The 1997 Law was to quickly 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 policy which were later adopted by the Russian authorities, were all inspired by the desire to protect the nation against foreign proselytizing movements, 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 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.

Such allegations progressively but more and more firmly grafted themselves onto the Federal Law on Counteraction of Extremist Activities (25 July 2002),also known as the anti-extremism law, which in its amended version in 2006 was purged of its violence element and hereby opened the way to the prosecution of non-violent religious groups.[[17]](#footnote-17)

***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.” The official name of the “foreign agent” is "*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*", is a law in Russia that requires non-profit organizations  that receive foreign donations and engage in "political activity" to register and declare themselves as foreign agents. This term was vaguely defined and easy to be misused.

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”. 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.

In this context of ‘foreign agent’ hunting, Jehovah’s Witnesses 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. It is a foreign movement coming from the United States and having its headquarters in that country which, since the Bolshevik revolution, has been the main enemy of Moscow. It is a movement that has the capacity to fight for its rights through the international human rights organizations and the European Court of Human Rights.

The eradication of Jehovah’s Witnesses was therefore an urgent and unnegotiable necessity to purify the Russian Orthodox lands from their presence.  The anti-extremism laws had however to be purged from their fundamental element of violence to be used against them. This was done in due time with the revision of the law in 2006.

Now, other religious denominations in Russia, such as Protestant churches and the Catholic Church, are on the radar of the spiritual security concept. A bill presented by the Russian government on 22 July last to the Russian parliament, forbids foreigners to participate in the activities of Russian religious associations, or even more so guide them.[[18]](#footnote-18) In addition to foreigners, the proposed ban on participating and leading communities is also extended to people classified as “extremists” and terrorists, according to official lists of the State Revisers Bureau. Moreover, the proposed ban also applies to believers in whose actions the court finds "signs of extremist activity". For some years now, Jehovah's Witnesses, various groups of Baptist Christians and other religious groups have been included in this list. This ban will soon create difficulties for Muslim preachers and Protestant pastors, but also for Catholic priests, among whom there are still many foreign missionaries, who are struggling to obtain or renew their permanent residence permits.

This bill is in the logics of the neutralization of the “foreign agents” strategy and “the spiritual security concept” leading to the elimination of a number of religious groups of “foreign origin” which are perceived as threatening the Russian Orthodox Church, or outside of the control thereof by other state-sanctioned religions.

Last but not least, the spiritual security concept, which is clearly protectionist and xenophobic, is meant not only to build up a cultural Iron Curtain being around Russia but also to be exported to ‘Orthodox lands’ inside the European Union.

***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 condemned the egregious violation of their religious freedom or the misuse of the anti-extremism legislation.

All the press releases of the Russian Orthodox Interfax-Religion agency are clear about that. The first two official reactions of the Russian Orthodox Church were very clear:

### 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”.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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”[[20]](#footnote-20):

Moscow, May 2, Interfax - 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.

### 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”.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The position of the Russian Orthodox Church concerning the sentence of Dennis Christensen to six years in prison and other Jehovah’s Witnesses was as heartless as it could be expected. On 23 May 2019, Interfax-Religion published a laconic press release titled “Oryol court upholds sentence for Danish Jehovah's Witness”[[22]](#footnote-22) in which it said Christensen had been sentenced for organizing the activity of an extremist banned religious group, Jehovah’s Witnesses.

***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. He claimed victory in RIA Novosti and on the TV Channel Sputnik a few weeks after the decision[[23]](#footnote-23).

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.

En 1999, Dvorkin testified as an expert in religious studies in a trial about the possible prohibition of activities of the Moscow Jehovah's Witnesses congregation at the Golovinsky Intermunicipal (District) Court of Moscow on request of the prosecutor[[24]](#footnote-24). This trial which had been going on for three weeks and was then entirely unprecedented in Russian legal practice as a secular court was required to judge theological issues. According to a document titled “A Heavenly Deliberation/ Selections from the transcript of a trial” (not accessible on internet) provided to the author by the Communication Department of the Jehovah’s Witnesses Headquarters in New York, which was the translation of an excerpt of the court proceedings, the lawyer of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Galina Krylova, contested 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.

After this first setback, Dvorkin went on campaigning against cults all over Russia and the former Soviet Republics, spreading all sorts of defamatory statements. These can be found in his anti-cult bible about “Totalitarian Sects”, a term he allegedly coined. They show that he "lacks academic credentials as a religion specialist," the United States Commisssion on International Religious Freedom USCIRF wrote in its 2009 Annual Report. About Jehovah’s Witnesses, Dvorkin was for example writing in his famous book[[25]](#footnote-25) :

*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."[[26]](#footnote-26)

*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.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

*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." [[28]](#footnote-28)

*The level of mental illness and suicide among Jehovah's Witnesses is many times 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." [[29]](#footnote-29)

Despite his abusive language, which could also be considered hate speech and incitement to hatred, Dvorkin managed to get heard from Russian political circles and to obtain repressive and discriminatory laws towards non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin.

Dvorkin was soon perceived as a useful instrument for the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin 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 went to the United States. While in the US, he got baptized in 1980 in an Orthodox Church of 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](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_the_Terrible" \o "Ivan the Terrible) as a Religious Type*. In 1992, he returned to a newly-independent Russia with many anti-cult ideas to work for the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 1993, he founded the *Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies*, an anti-cult propaganda center, which was blessed by the then Patriarch Alexey II of the Russian Orthodox Church and became a global network of local Orthodox-oriented anti-cult civic groups and missionary departments of Orthodox dioceses.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The *Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies* is also the head centre of the *Russian Association of Centres for Religious and Sectarian Studies* (RATsIRS).The president of RATsIRS is also A.L. Dvorkin; 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 been chairing the *Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies* which later on became the Russian member association of FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), an international anti-cult organization.

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

Quite recently, the nefarious role of Dvorkin has been recognized by a prestigious US state institution, USCIRF, in its report “The Anti-Cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union”[[31]](#footnote-31):

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 interviewwith 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.

In its recommendations, USCIRF says among other things the U.S. government should:

* Publicly censure Alexander Dvorkin and the Saint Irenaeus of Leon Information-Consultation Center (SILIC)) for their ongoing disinformation campaign against religious minorities;
* Counter propaganda against new religious movements by the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS) at the annual 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 organized 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 Slavic Orthodox lands of Russia dates back to the mid-1990s when the Orthodox Church and the clerical anti-cult movement headed by Alexander Dvorkin started mobilizing their public opinion and lobbying the Russian parliament for passing a law granting an inferior legal status, and consequently fewer rights, to ‘non-traditional’ religious movements. The first step of the final objective was reached in 1997 with the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. The next legislative instruments to be used afterwards against Jehovah’s Witnesses were the 2002 Law on Counteraction of Extremist Activities, and mainly its amended version in 2006 removing the criterion of use of or incitement to violence to be possibly qualified and criminalized as ‘extremist’. In 2012, the Law on “foreign agents” indirectly reinforced the state policy hostile to any foreign influence.

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 for sanctions that include the Russian anti-cult movement and their mentor, Alexander Dvorkin, but also the FECRIS 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, 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 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 battle.

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2. See a timeline of the banning procedure at <https://www.jw.org/en/news/releases/by-region/russia/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2257> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24145&LangID=E>

   Comment by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet on criminalising the right to freedom of religion for Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, 7 February 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/council-europe/58080/node/58080_fi>

   Delegation of the European Union to the Council of Europe, Statement by the Spokesperson on the sentencing of Dennis Christensen in Russia, 13 February 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases-statements/uscirf-condemns-russian-conviction-danish-prisoner-conscience>, 7 February 2019.

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8. Kommersant (17.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2n8PBF2>

   ## «Мы бы посмеялись, если бы нам не было грустно»

   # Представитель Свидетелей Иеговы о конфликте с Минюстом

   "We would have laughed if we were not sad"

   Representative of Jehovah's Witnesses on the conflict with the Ministry of Justice [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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11. <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=19116&lang=en> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2012)016-e> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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22. <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=15129> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201705211053836265-human-rights-ban-effect/> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES CASE: TESTING THE 1997 LAW "ON FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE AND RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS" AND THE RUSSIAN LEGAL PROCESS, byCHARLOTTE WALLACE\* , Published by California Western International Law Journal, Vol. 32, No. 1 [2001], <https://scholarlycommons.law.cwsl.edu/cwilj/vol32/iss1/3/> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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