

SPECIAL REPORT

# RUSSIA'S ATTACK ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

STATE-SPONSORED PERSECUTION  
BRINGS BAN ON JEHOVAH'S  
WITNESSES IN RUSSIA

OFFICE OF GENERAL COUNSEL  
WORLD HEADQUARTERS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

MARCH 2017

# Russian authorities take final step to ban the peaceful worship of Jehovah's Witnesses

**15 MARCH 2017**

**The Ministry of Justice issued a directive** to suspend immediately the activity of the national Administrative Center and all 395 legal entities, or Local Religious Organizations (LROs), of Jehovah's Witnesses. The directive effectively bans the religious activity of Jehovah's Witnesses until the Supreme Court makes the final determination.

**The Ministry of Justice filed a claim** with the Supreme Court, demanding that the Administrative Center and all LROs be liquidated and deleted from the official State registry and that all property owned by the Administrative Center and all LROs, which includes all Kingdom Halls (houses of worship), be confiscated by the State.

## SINCE 2016

**16**

Criminal  
Convictions

**30**

Raids

**34**

Home Searches

**64**

Detentions  
or Arrests

**5** Local Religious Organizations  
Liquidated

## SINCE 2010

88 Religious publications banned

Official website banned

Shipments of Holy Bibles confiscated

Religious buildings and  
property confiscated

All religious literature denied  
entry

Thousands of detainments  
or arrests

# 1

## CRIMINALIZE RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

The Federal Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity is used as the basis for charges of extremism against Jehovah's Witnesses. As amended in 2006, the law does not require calls to violent acts, only the vague concept of "incitement of . . . religious discord."

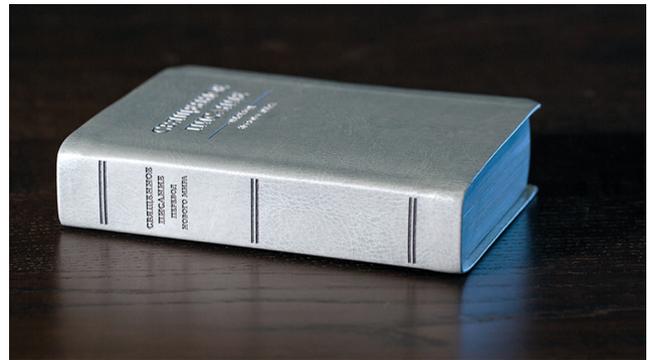
### Law on extremism misapplied to Jehovah's Witnesses

In 2008, the Rostov Regional Prosecutor's Office commissioned an expert study of the Witnesses' religious literature. The study concluded that Jehovah's Witnesses do not urge hostile action either in their literature or in carrying out their activities.

However, the Rostov Regional Court focused on the experts' opinion that theological discussion in the Witnesses' literature had "the potential to undermine respect" for other religions.

The court concluded that this "undermining [of] respect" was "aimed at inciting religious discord" and considered it evidence of "extremism."

On 11 September 2009, the Rostov Regional Court ruled to declare 34 Witness publications "extremist," and these were eventually placed on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. The court also declared the Taganrog LRO "extremist" and ordered federal



Russian authorities have denied importation of the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, a Bible translation published by Jehovah's Witnesses. Officials have initiated proceedings to declare it "extremist."

authorities to liquidate it, ban its activity, place its name on a list of extremist organizations, confiscate its religious literature and its property.

**By the start of 2016, similar court actions had declared 88 religious publications "extremist," liquidated three LROs, and confiscated at least one house of worship.**

#### DR. EKATERINA ELBAKYAN

Professor of Sociology and Management  
of Social Processes at the Moscow  
Academy of Labor and Social Relations

“ It is true that in Russia today religious expert studies are often performed by people who are not specialists, and are made-to-order, so to speak, where an expert is not free to state his true findings. ”

# 2

## CRIMINALIZE LOCAL RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Russian courts have used the Federal Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity to declare “extremist” the legal entities supporting congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Russian courts have declared Witness literature “extremist” based on bogus “expert studies” and a vague definition of extremism. Because the Witnesses distribute religious literature, the courts have then linked the Local Religious Organization (LRO) to the literature and concluded that the LRO engages in “extremist activity.” Courts therefore declare the LRO extremist, liquidate it, ban its activity, and confiscate its property. In each case, the Supreme Court has confirmed the LRO liquidations.

Therefore, the Ministry of Justice’s claim to liquidate all 395 LROs threatens each of the 2,277 congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia.

**There are more than 60 documented incidents since 2012 where authorities invented a “crime” by planting banned religious literature that Jehovah’s Witnesses had long before removed from their places of worship and no longer use.**

### LROs LIQUIDATED AS EXTREMIST

### BASIS FOR LIQUIDATION

1	<b>Taganrog</b>	“Expert study”
2	<b>Samara</b>	“Extremist” literature planted by authorities
3	<b>Abinsk</b>	Fabricated claim that LRO members distributed “extremist literature”
4	<b>Belgorod</b>	“Extremist” literature planted by authorities
5	<b>Stariy Oskol</b>	“Extremist” literature planted by authorities
6	<b>Elista</b>	“Extremist” literature planted by authorities
7	<b>Orel</b>	“Extremist” literature planted by authorities
8	<b>Birobidzhan</b>	“Extremist” literature planted by authorities

# 3

## CRIMINALIZE THE ADMINISTRATIVE CENTER

On 15 March 2017, the Ministry of Justice filed a claim in the Supreme Court “to declare the religious organization, the Administrative Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses, extremist, ban its activity, and liquidate it.”

The Ministry of Justice has formally requested the Supreme Court to “arrest” the properties belonging to the Administrative Center. It also seeks the liquidation of the places of worship of Jehovah’s Witnesses throughout Russia.

On the same date, 15 March 2017, the First Deputy Director of the Ministry of Justice issued a directive to suspend immediately the activity of the national Administrative Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses of Russia and all 395 LROs of Jehovah’s Witnesses. That directive took immediate effect and states

that the Administrative Center and all 395 LROs are forbidden to “organize and hold assemblies, rallies, demonstrations, processions, and other mass or public events; and to use bank deposits.”

**The directive imposes an immediate nationwide ban on all legal entities of Jehovah’s Witnesses, pending determination of the liquidation claim.**

**The Supreme Court has scheduled a hearing on the liquidation claim for 5 April 2017 at 10:00 a.m.**



Jehovah's Witnesses' national  
Administrative Center near St. Petersburg

## INFOGRAPHIC

# RUSSIA'S SYSTEMATIC ATTACK ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In 2006, Russia revised the Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity, vaguely defining extremism.

In 2007, the Prosecutor General's Office directed all local prosecutors to investigate Jehovah's Witnesses. This brought a systematic attack on the peaceful religious activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

### STEP 1: CRIMINALIZE RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

Since 2009, courts have used bogus "expert studies" and a vague definition of "extremism" to declare many Witness publications "extremist"

**88** Publications currently declared extremist



LROs are liquidated; houses of worship are confiscated

**8** LROs liquidated



### STEP 2: CRIMINALIZE LOCAL RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Witnesses are detained or charged with possessing or distributing "extremist" literature or with continuing the activities of an "extremist organization"

**16** Witnesses criminally convicted so far



Police search homes and houses of worship for literature declared "extremist" by the courts

#### FABRICATING EVIDENCE!

Agents have been caught on video planting "extremist" literature in the Witnesses' facilities and then later "discovering" it during a raid



### STEP 3: CRIMINALIZE THE ADMINISTRATIVE CENTER

**2 March 2016:** Prosecutor General's Office issues a warning to liquidate the national Administrative Center. Fabrication of evidence then intensifies to establish "new evidence" of extremism

**15 March 2017:** Ministry of Justice files a liquidation claim against the Administrative Center and all LROs. It also issues a directive to impose an immediate nationwide ban on all legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses, pending determination of the liquidation claim.



### STEP 4: CRIMINALIZE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

175,000 of Jehovah's Witnesses are subject to criminal prosecution for their worship

# 4

## CRIMINALIZE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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When Russian courts liquidate the LROs of Jehovah's Witnesses, it results in the violation of individuals' fundamental rights. A number of Jehovah's Witnesses have already been criminally convicted.

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### **Under the guise of "fighting extremism"**

Authorities restrict the Witnesses' peaceful exercise of their freedom of religion by denying them access to sacred texts and religious literature, restricting freedom of assembly, raiding their meetings for worship, prosecuting them for their efforts to share their faith, confiscating their places of worship, and imposing punitive fines for practicing their faith.

### **Under the guise of "investigative activity"**

Law enforcement officers violate:

- The right to liberty and security by the use of force, police detentions, personal searches, and photographing persons against their will.
- The right to privacy by collecting information on individual Witnesses, including financial and health information, and by inspections and searches of family homes.

### **As a result of State repression, the Witnesses have suffered societal discrimination for over a decade**

When the mass media reports on court decisions and other government actions against the Witnesses, the presumption is that the Witnesses' faith promotes criminal activity and that Witnesses are criminals.

Witnesses have suffered harassment at the workplace and at school, been subjected to hostility and suspicion on the part of relatives and neighbors, and been harmed physically and psychologically.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been victims of attacks, beatings, and attempted murder by aggressive individuals. Their houses of worship are attacked with acts of vandalism and arson.

A number of Jehovah's Witnesses have been placed on a public list of accomplices to terrorism because of the government's charges of "extremism."

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In Russia, there are more than 175,000 active Jehovah's Witnesses, and over 290,000 attend their religious meetings.

## **JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RESPECTFULLY REQUEST THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION TO:**

- Stop the repression of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia
- Cease misapplying legislation on extremism to the peaceful worship of Jehovah's Witnesses
- Ensure that Jehovah's Witnesses can peacefully enjoy freedom of religion and assembly without interference as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation

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Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue with representatives of the Russian government.



Scan the QR code to learn more about legal developments and human rights affecting Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.