

PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS IN RUSSIA: A FATE NEVER EASY

Igor A. Kotler

Protestant denominations in Russia have experienced a long and often difficult history, beginning in the 16th and 17th centuries when German settlers and foreign merchants introduced Lutheran and Reformed traditions under Tsarist rule. Although rulers like Peter the Great and Catherine the Great offered Protestants some degree of religious tolerance, their rights remained unstable and subject to governmental control. During the imperial period, Protestants were permitted to exist but remained on the margins, often limited to ethnically distinct communities and faced with barriers to proselytizing and building churches. The situation deteriorated drastically during the Soviet era, when religious life was systematically suppressed; Protestant leaders and followers were monitored, detained, sent to labor camps, or forced to practice their faith in secret. Following the Soviet collapse, a brief revival occurred in the 1990s, yet Protestant communities soon found themselves again under pressure, especially as the Russian Orthodox Church reestablished itself as the dominant religious force and sought to consolidate its influence. From their earliest days in Russia, Protestant groups have repeatedly encountered institutional suspicion, legal constraints, and waves of repression imposed by both the state and prevailing religious authorities.

The cooperation between the state and the Orthodox Church continues to the present, when Russia has partly turned away from Communism. In need of a new ideology, the government used the formula of “recreating the old Rus (the ancient name of Russia)” and a strong national church fits perfectly into this concept. But a wide variety of religious movements and communities are completely out of the national church concept. As a result, they are preserved only for the sake of the international reputation of Russia, but undergo very strong pressure from the state and from the Orthodox Church.

The position of the Russian Orthodox Church is clear. It demands a special status in Russia based on the notion of “traditional religion,” which would give the Church a lot of privileges before other confessions and religious groups. Church leaders insist that “only the Russian Orthodox Church can be a faithful partner to the state in the matter of recreating the former glory of Russia” and therefore request the extension of the support the state gives to the

Church. In return they offer help in tackling the problem of the minor religious groups whom they accuse of espionage.¹

As one can see, the position of the Russian officials and the Russian Orthodox Church are not really different, which gives them an opportunity to work hand in hand in reestablishing the complete dominion of the latter.

There are many groups and organizations who proclaim Russian nationalism as their ideology. One of the oldest are Cossacks, a militant group of Russian irregulars, who reestablished themselves after the breakup of the Soviet Union and spread out more and more in the southern regions of Russia as well as in many other areas. The major center of Cossacks, the Krasnodar Region, contains their settlements where the authorities use the Cossacks to harass minorities and where they are allowed to patrol the streets in full cooperation with police.

The organization “Pamyat,” Russian National Unity, National Bolsheviks, “Nashi,” skinheads and many others represent a growing wave of nationalism in Russia. These organizations receive support and sympathy among various strata of Russian society.

The Law on Religion of 1997, regulating religious life in Russia, became one of the fruits of this relationship. Before that, those matters were regulated by Soviet law, enacted in the last days of the Soviet Union, which provided wide and equal freedom to all religious communities. The Russian Orthodox Church grew strong, supported by the local authorities and the general atmosphere of spiritual hunger and returning to traditional values. But the “untraditional” religions started to expand their reach in Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church--nostalgic for the leading position it had held in Russian society before the Bolsheviks--soon pushed for a law to restrict, if not ban, the activities of foreign religious workers and of non-orthodox Christians (as well as dissident Orthodox groups). It is interesting to note that the Church was supported by the Communists, a major faction in the Duma.

In fact, the vast majority of Duma deputies supported the new law. President Boris Yeltsin finalized the Law and signed it in October of 1997.²

It was largely criticized by international human rights organizations due to its openly discriminatory statutes toward many religions. Thus, the Law announced Russian Orthodoxy as

¹ Yuri Maximov. Waiting for The New Concept of The Church-State Relationships. April 25, 2001. Pravoslavie.ru

² Elliott Abrams. *In Russia, “Liquidating” Churches* The Washington Post, 11.14.2000, Page A43.

the only traditional Christian denominations in Russia. It also pointed out that only those confessions which were registered 15 years prior to the Law could be reregistered.

The Law violates Russia's international commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It legitimizes an onerous and intrusive registration process that has resulted in endless incidents of discrimination and persecution. The Parliament Assembly of Europe carried out a resolution that stressed the fact that the local authorities are favoring the Russian Orthodox Church, and many religious groups registered on the federal level cannot register locally.³

Russia's law on religions has received scathing criticism from various quarters, including the International Coalition for Religious Freedom, which describes itself as a “non-profit” and “non-sectarian” defender of religious liberty.

The International Coalition for Religious Freedom condemned Russia's law on religions as a “blatant manifestation of intolerance and religious discrimination toward practically all religious organizations.”

An amendment signed into the law by Russian President Vladimir Putin in the spring of 2000 threatened the “liquidation” of thousands of religious groups. He extended the registration deadline until the end of the year, but those who tried to register late were supposed to be “liquidated”. The slow and cumbersome procedure did not allow enough time for most of the religious groups to register. This matter was even discussed during the meeting of Presidents Putin and Clinton in November 2000.

Despite pressure from the international community, Russian officials keep harassing minority religious groups. Police, the Federal Security Service (FSB), procurators, tax officials and others participate in this campaign. Examples are numerous.

Despite the fact that there are Protestant churches in major and sometimes even smaller Russian cities, they function almost like besieged medieval fortresses, i.e. they are vandalized, desecrated, targeted by arsonists and disrupted by the authorities. Many individuals, who are interested in Protestant ideas and who are looking for spirituality in Protestantism, are afraid to attend those churches due to the risk of nationalistic attacks and mistreatment by authorities.

On April 20, 2017, the Supreme Court of Russia banned the Jehovah's Witnesses, which the authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church perceive as a dangerous and destructive sect

³ Sedmica.narod.ru PACE Is Worried About The Unequal Execution Of The Law On Religion In Russia Issue #33, May 1, 2002

(read ‘cult’), declaring them an extremist organization. The ban was a culmination of a long campaign against the group, where the group’s religious activities and literature were banned in some regions of Russia.⁴ All the property belonging to the organization was to be seized and any religious activities are now considered illegal and penalized with fines and prison sentences.⁵

Starting in the fall of 2017, the Russian government unleashed a frontal assault on Protestant congregations. New churches were not allowed to be built, parishioners were fined and threatened, the promotion of Baptism was severely censored, and journalists who attempted to support the freedom of religion were harassed. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe stated that, “Evangelical Christians, Lutherans, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Presbyterians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhist, Scientologists, and others are persecuted in Russia, and some of them are arrested under the Anti-Extremism Law of 2002.”⁶

At the end of November 2017, police in the village of Palana arrested two Baptists who conducted a public religious service. The court fined them for holding unauthorized picketing.⁷

On January 23, 2018, the Nizhny Novgorod Court found Kudzai Niamarebva, a student from Zimbabwe, guilty of illegal missionary activities after she invited her friends to listen to African music in the Embassy of Jesus Baptist Church.⁸ On February 5, 2018, a group of nationalists held a rally in front of a Baptist prayer house in Astrakhan, holding the banners that read, “Down with *sekta*”⁹ and “Beware of the *sekta*.”¹⁰ On March 26, 2018, the court fined an

⁴ Верховный суд принял решение о ликвидации Управленческого Центра Свидетелей Иеговы в России (The Supreme Court Ruled to Liquidate the Administrative Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia). SOVA Center for Information and Analysis. April 20, 2017. <http://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/extremism/counter-extremism/2017/04/d36871/>

⁵ Russia Bans the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Just as the Soviet Union Did. The Economist. April 29, 2017. <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21721395-russian-orthodox-church-does-not-competition-russia-bans-jehovahs-witnesses-just>

⁶ Парламентская Ассамблея Совета Европы приняла декларацию о свободе вероисповедания в России (The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Adopted the Declaration on the Religious Freedom in Russia). SOVA Center for Information and Analysis. October 16, 2017. <http://www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/counteraction/2017/10/d38066/>

⁷ На Камчатке двух христиан-баптистов осудили за уличную проповедь (Two Baptists were Sentenced for a Public Preaching in Kamchatka). Kam24 News Agency. January 23, 2018. <https://www.kam24.ru/news/main/55934.html>

⁸ Студентка из Зимбабве, пригласившая друзей на концерт африканской музыки в церковь ХВЕ, будет выдворена из страны за «незаконное миссионерство» (A Student from Zimbabwe Who Invited Her Friends to a Concert of African Music at a Baptist Church Would Be Deported for “Illegal Missionary Activities”). SOVA Center for Information and Analysis. April 24, 2018. <http://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/intervention/2018/04/d39261/>

⁹ Sekta in Russian means a cult.

individual in Tiksi for hosting an illegal Baptist gathering and distributing of religious literature.¹¹ In March 2018, the Administration of the Ministry of Justice in Omsk Oblast filed a court motion to close the Faith Generation Evangelic Church, let by Pastor Vitalii Kravets.¹² In May 2018, Russian authorities expelled a Zimbabwean student for reposting Pentecostal “propaganda.”¹³ In January 2019, a Baptist church was liquidated in Sevastopol, located in the annexed Crimea.¹⁴ In February 2019, a Danish Jehovah’s Witness was sentenced to six years in prison for “organizing an extremist group.”¹⁵

Jehovah’s Witnesses In Russia reports: On March 26, 2019, FSB investigator Sergey Bosiev charged Artem Gerasimov, who had been previously detained, for interrogation during the search of eight houses in Alupka, Gurzuf and Yalta (Crimea), charged with organizing extremist activities (Part 1 of Article 282.2 of the Russian Criminal Code). Another one of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Taras Kuzyo, is also a suspect in this case. Both men were released after being interrogated.¹⁶ Also, On March 26, 2019, in the town of Yemanzhelinsk (Chelyabinsk Region) at about 7 a.m., there was a soft knock at the door of the apartment where the couple Pavel and Elena Popov live. When they opened the door, they saw about 10 people in masks with assault weapons and a sledge hammer for breaking the door open. The Popovs were informed that a search would be conducted in their home due to the fact that they profess the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. Their computer, phones, tablets, family photos, books and international passports were confiscated. After the search, the pair was taken away for questioning in another city. According to law enforcement officers, whether they will be

¹⁰ В Астрахани «волонтеры» и телевидение выступили против баптистов-инициативников (Volunteers and the TV Campaigned against Baptist Initiatives). SOVA Center for Information and Analysis. February 8, 2018.

<https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/community-media/against-sects/2018/02/d38816/>

¹¹ В Якутии суд оштрафовал верующего, в квартире которого проходило собрание ЕХБ (The Court in Yakutia Fined a Believer in Whose Apartment a Baptist Gathering Took Place). March 27, 2018. SOVA Center for Information and Analysis. <http://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/intervention/2018/03/d39083/>

¹² В Омске ликвидируют церковь «пятидесятников» (A Pentecostal Church in Being Liquidated in Omsk). SuperOmsk News Agency. March 29, 2018. http://superomsk.ru/news/61384-v_omske_likvidiruyut_ukrainskuyu_tserkov_pyatidesy/

¹³ Позор области: епископ Ряховский прокомментировал высылку студентки за репост (Shame to the Oblast: Bishop Ryakhovsky Commented on the Deportation of a Student for a Repost). MK News Agency. May 3, 2018.

¹⁴ Baptist Church In Russian Occupied Crimea Shut Down: Court Liquidates Baptist Religious Organization In Sevastopol. Russia Religious News -Interfax-Religiia, January 9, 2019.

<https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/190109a.html>

¹⁵ Alan Yuhas. Russian Court Sentences Jehovah’s Witness to 6 Years in Prison. *The New York Times*, February 6, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/world/europe/russia-jehovah-witnesses.html>

¹⁶ FSB Declares a Resident of Crimea Extremist for Beliefs. *Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia*, April 3, 2019. <https://jw-russia.org/en/news/19040314-718.html>

detained, “depends on how they will cooperate.” (Law enforcers across the country threaten believers to intimidate them into incriminating themselves or others by “confessing” that they are carrying out extremist activities.)¹⁷



FSB Invading a Jehovah's Witness's House in Crimea, March 2019. <https://jw-russia.org/en/news/19040314-718.html>

Also, in March, 2019, as Evangelical Focus reports, two Latter Day Saints (LDS, Mormon) volunteers have been detained for two weeks and deported from Russia and flew back to the United States, after spending almost three weeks in jail on unclear charges.¹⁸

On April 7, 2019 as some 50 congregants celebrated the Annunciation at the Baptist church in Verkhnebakansky near Novorossiisk, law enforcement agents stormed in and interrupted the service. According to Presbyterian Yevgeny Kokora, the choir temporarily halted its rendition of Jesus is My Lighthouse while the pastor pleaded with the officers. They wrote up a report and left just as the service was drawing to a close.

The following day, Kokora went with 71-year-old Pastor Yury Korniyenko to the prosecutor's office in Novorossiisk, seeking to file an official complaint. They were told the

¹⁷ Searches, Seizures, Fear Tactics in Chelyabinsk Region. *Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia*, March 26, 2019. <https://jw-russia.org/en/news/19032618-690.html>

¹⁸ Latter Day Saints volunteers deported from Russia after three weeks in detention. Evangelical Focus, March 21, 2019. http://evangelicalfocus.com/europe/4310/Latter_Day_Saints_volunteers_deported_from_Russia_after_three_weeks_in_detention

prosecutor wouldn't be taking visitors for the next three weeks. The local branch of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) heard the two Baptists out, but made no promises.

On April 9, Korniyenko received a court summons and was subsequently charged with engaging in illegal missionary work.¹⁹

Such incidents clearly indicate the pervasiveness and increasing popularity of nationalist ideas in Russian society as well as vulnerability of religious minorities.

On July 8, 2016 the Russian regime issued a new law, which severely limits the freedom of religion. *The Christianity Today* reports: Protestants and religious minorities small enough to gather in homes fear they will be most affected. Last month, "the local police officer came to a home where a group of Pentecostals meet each Sunday," Konstantin Bendas, deputy bishop of the Pentecostal Union, told Forum 18. "With a contented expression he told them: 'Now they're adopting the law with which I'll drive you all out of here.' I reckon we should now fear such zealous enforcement.

There are potentially very wide-sweeping ramifications to this law," Joel Griffith of the Slavic Gospel Association said in a Mission Network News report. "It just depends on, again, how it is going to be enforced, and that is a very huge question mark. Christians in Russia won't be allowed to email their friends an invitation to the church or even to evangelize in their own homes if Russia's newest set of surveillance and anti-terrorism laws are enacted.

The proposed laws, considered the country's most restrictive measures in post-Soviet history, place broad limitations on missionary work, including preaching, teaching, and engaging in any activity designed to recruit people into a religious group.

To share their faith, citizens must secure a government permit through a registered religious organization, and they cannot evangelize anywhere besides churches and other religious sites. The restrictions even apply to activity in private residences and online. Following a wave of Russian nationalist propaganda, the laws passed almost unanimously in the Duma, the upper house, and in the Federation Council, the lower house.

If this legislation is approved, the religious situation in the country will grow considerably more complicated and many believers will find themselves in exile and subjected to

¹⁹ Matthew Luxmoore. Russia Charges Baptist Pastor In A Sign That Its Religious Clampdown Could Be Spreading. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, April 24, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-charges-baptist-pastor-in-a-sign-that-its-religious-clampdown-could-be-spreading/29901315.html>

reprisals because of our faith,” wrote Oleg Goncharov, spokesman for the Seventh-day Adventists’ Euro-Asia division, in an open letter.

Proposed by United Russia party lawmaker Irina Yarovaya, the law appears to target religious groups outside the Russian Orthodox Church. Because it defines missionary activities as religious practices to spread a faith beyond its members, “if that is interpreted as the Moscow Patriarchate is likely to, it will mean the Orthodox Church can go after ethnic Russians but that no other church will be allowed to,” according to Frank Goble, an expert on religious and ethnic issues in the region.

One of the first victims of the law became Scientologists. Russian authorities closed the group’s Moscow branch in 2016. The Justice Ministry has also declared some of the group's literature extremist.²⁰

The regime went after smaller groups as well. For example, the "Union of Co-Creators of Sacred Rus", a mystical-esoteric movement founded by Leonid Maslov that brought together followers embracing unique spiritual and metaphysical beliefs by blending elements of Christianity with esoteric teachings, was dissolved in January 2016 when the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation ruled to disband the organization. The verdict stemmed from breaches of anti-extremism legislation identified by the Ministry of Justice. Specifically, the group’s websites featured links and content related to Maslov's prohibited publications, which contravened prevailing legal standards.

Prior to its dissolution, the "Union of Co-Creators of Sacred Rus" was officially registered as a multi-regional civic association with branches across various parts of Russia. The organization was actively engaged in socio-political activities, disseminated its literature, and expanded its following. Nevertheless, its operations provoked apprehension among representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and law enforcement bodies. The organization was described as an authoritarian sekta with a strict hierarchy and questionable spiritual practices. Following extensive inquiries and judicial proceedings, the organization was formally disbanded, and its operations were deemed non-compliant with Russian Federation law.²¹

²⁰ Russia Declares Church Of Scientology 'Undesirable.' RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, September 24, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-scientology-undesirable-/31477089.html>

²¹ Верховный суд ликвидировал «Союз сотворцов Святой Руси» (The Supreme Court dissolved the "Union of Co-Creators of Holy Rus"). SOVA, January 19, 2026. <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/refusal/2016/01/d33654/>

Russian nationalist identity remains tied up with the Russian Orthodox Church. “The Russian Orthodox Church is part of a bulwark of Russian nationalism stirred up by Vladimir Putin,” David Aikman, history professor and foreign affairs expert, told CT. “Everything that undermines that action is a real threat, whether that’s evangelical Protestant missionaries or anything else.”

Sergei Ryakhovsky, head of the Protestant Churches of Russia, and several other evangelical leaders called the law a violation of religious freedom and personal conscience in a letter to Putin posted on the Russian site Portal-Credo. The letter reads, in part: The obligation on every believer to have a special permit to spread his or her beliefs, as well as hand out religious literature and material outside of places of worship and used structures is not only absurd and offensive, but also creates the basis for mass persecution of believers for violating these provisions.

Soviet history shows us how many people of different faiths have been persecuted for spreading the Word of God. This law brings us back to a shameful past.

Stalin-era religious restrictions—including outlawing religious activity outside of Sunday services in registered churches and banning parents from teaching faith to their kids—remained on the books until the collapse of the Soviet Union, though the government enforced them only selectively.

The proposal is an “attack on freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and the right to privacy that gives law enforcement unreasonably broad powers,” the humanitarian group Human Rights Watch told *The Guardian*.

Russia has already moved to contain foreign missionaries. The “foreign agent” law, adopted in 2012, requires groups from abroad to file detailed paperwork and be subject to government audits and raids. Since then, the NGO sector has shrunk by a third, according to government statistics.²²

The law was actively used against Baptists and Pentecostals when the seminaries were prohibited from admitting new students starting in November 2018. “Inspections of Evangelical universities in 2018-2019 have shown the inconsistency of legislation on education and freedom

²² Kate Shellnutt. Russia's Newest Law: No Evangelizing Outside of Church (UPDATE): Putin signs new restrictions that limit where and how Christians share the gospel. Christianity Today. July 8, 2016. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/june/no-evangelizing-outside-of-church-russia-proposes.html>

of conscience, which has created a lot of problems for our educational institutions”, Eurasian Theological Seminary Rector Aleksei Gorbachev commented. “I believe these actions have a systemic, intentional character, under the pretext of supervision of educational activities”, Pentecostal Union lawyer Vladimir Ozolin also added. “In this way, pressure is being exerted on the non-traditional confessions; this is perhaps another act of intimidation.”²³

The Church of Scientology, which is deemed extremist in Russia, also went under attack by the regime. In March 2019, the police raided the churches of Scientology in Moscow and St. Petersburg, accusing the Church of sending money raised in Russia to the United States.²⁴

Meanwhile, the Jehovah’s Witnesses continue to suffer a lot. For example, four Jehovah’s Witnesses in Spassky-Dalnii were detained and put under house arrest in December 2019.²⁵

The regime further attacks Pentecostals using the courts. For example, in November 2019, the court in Nizhny Novgorod banned the use of the premises of the Pentecostal church.²⁶ In December 2019 the court in Kaluga banned the local Pentecostal church.²⁷

The most active role in the persecution of Protestant followers belongs to security services. Russian security agencies are using sweeping surveillance powers of the Yarovaya Law, introduced in 2016, to impose harsh restrictions on Evangelical Christian groups in the name of tackling vaguely defined “extremist” activities. The punitive law, which imposes tough fines and even potential expulsion from Russia, places heightened restrictions on religious groups including requiring an official permit to meet outside officially registered religious buildings. This, in effect, outlaws prayer and other meetings held in Christians’ homes as well as

²³ Russia suspends activities of Baptist and Pentecostal theological seminaries. Evangelical Focus, April 1, 2019. http://evangelicalfocus.com/europe/4340/Russia_suspends_activities_of_Baptist_and_Pentecostal_theological_seminarieshttp://evangelicalfocus.com/europe/4340/Russia_suspends_activities_of_Baptist_and_Pentecostal_theological_seminaries

²⁴ Christina Maza. Russian Police Raid Scientology Offices, Accusing Church of Siphoning Millions of Dollars Back to U.S. Newsweek, March 29, 2019. <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-scientologist-church-religion-persecution-1380237>

²⁵ СК сообщил о передаче в суд дела Свидетелей Иеговы из Спасска-Дальнего (SK [Investigative Committee] Informed That The Case of Jehovah’s Witnesses Was Sent To Court). SOVA, December 19, 2019. <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/extremism/counter-extremism/2019/12/d41862/>

²⁶ Суд запретил церкви в Нижнем Новгороде использовать здание (Court Banned Church in Nizhny Novgorod Use of the Building). Russian United Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, November 26, 2019. <https://www.cef.ru/infoblock/news/read/article/1531622>

²⁷ Калужский районный суд запретил использовать здание поместной церкви «Слово жизни» (Kaluga District Court Banned the Use of the Premises of Word of Life Church). Russian United Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, December 9, 2019. <https://www.cef.ru/infoblock/news/read/article/1532895>

criminalizing house churches. The controversial provisions of the law give security agencies access to private communications held by telecom companies including ‘phone conversations and text messages. Concerns have been raised that email and other electronic communications inviting interested individuals to church services could also be banned. The restrictions of the Yarovaya Law clearly target Protestant Christian groups and activities. However, Russian Orthodox leaders have also raised alarms in the past three years over the draconian law. “There are practically no Protestants that haven't been impacted by the law,” said a pastor of a registered Protestant church in Moscow. “I lead a congregation of 50 people, and almost every Sunday a police squad interrupts our services ... Sometimes, local authorities dress up like civilians and knock on our door, asking to be let in so they can ‘pray’. If we do not let them in, they film us turning them away and then use the footage against us. And if we do let them in, then they take pictures inside the church to identify ways that we are violating the Yarovaya Law. We have had to pay several fines for ‘illegal missionary activity’.” A study of the law’s impact over the past two years, carried out by the Slavic Legal Centre and others, found no religious extremist or terrorist cases, but instead a plethora of harsh restrictions that have been placed on Christians for legitimate and harmless activities.

In the city of Noyabrsk, pastors from a Baptist denomination were fined for building a children’s playground near a church. Police claimed that the children could be subjected to “illegal missionary activity” by reading the religious literature found when they searched the building. A Christian husband and wife, in the Ivanovo region, were investigated for “illegal missionary activity” after praying together before a meal while out to dinner with friends. The couple were later declared an “unregistered religious group” by the authorities.²⁸

²⁸ Russian security agencies targeting Christians for punitive restrictions under new “anti-extremism” law. Barnabasfund, December 17, 2019. <https://barnabasfund.org/en/news/russian-security-agencies-targeting-christians-for-punitive-restrictions-under-new-%E2%80%99Canti>



Special Rapid Response Unit raids a Jehovah's Witness home in Nizhny Novgorod Oblast. © 2019 Koza Press

The Human Rights Watch noted that law enforcement authorities across Russia have dramatically escalated the nationwide persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2019. The numbers of house raids and people under criminal investigation have more than doubled, and 32 Jehovah's Witnesses worshipers are behind bars for peacefully practicing their faith. At least 313 people faced charges, were on trial, or have been convicted of criminal "extremism" for engaging in Jehovah's Witnesses' activities, or are suspects in such cases. About two-thirds of them found out about their status as suspects or accused in 2019. Authorities have carried out at least 780 house raids since 2017 in more than 70 towns and cities across Russia, more than half of them in 2019. Courts convicted 18 people in 2019, nine of whom received prison sentences ranging from two to six years, for such activities such as leading or participating in prayer meetings. "For Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, practicing their faith means risking their freedom," said Rachel Denber, deputy Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "There is nothing remotely justifiable about this. It's time for President Putin to ensure that law enforcement stop this harmful persecution." Most of those targeted are men, though at least 39 women have faced charges. Most targeted are middle-aged, although ages have ranged from an 89-year-old woman named as a suspect in a December 2019 criminal investigation in the

Stavropol region and an 85-year-old woman on trial in Vladivostok, to a 19-year-old woman in the Sverdlovsk region charged in May 2019. Most were charged under Article 282.2 of the criminal code, for either organizing or participating in the activities of an organization banned by a court as “extremist.” Local police carried out the house raids, often with armed and masked Rosgvardia (National Guard) personnel, special rapid reaction police, and Federal Security Service (FSB) officers. They confiscated Bibles and other religious materials, computers, phones, and other personal items and rounded up residents for questioning. In many cases, the authorities had been conducting surveillance on people for months, including recording or photographing them at prayer meetings, praying, singing, or reading.

Christian groups are concerned that persecution against their communities could be spreading, after a Baptist pastor was charged for “illegal” missionary work and other Protestant congregations have faced church closures and fines.

In April 2019, in the Russian town of Verkhnebakansky near the Black Sea coast, a Baptist congregation was commemorating Annunciation when law enforcement stormed in and interrupted the service, Radio Free Europe reported. A couple of days later, on April 9, the church's pastor—71-year-old pastor Yury Korniyenko—was formally charged with carrying out “illegal” missionary work. If the elderly religious leader is convicted, he would face a large fine.

Other Protestant denominations, such as Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists, have also experienced problems with local authorities in recent months. In March, authorities tore down a Pentecostal church in the Black Sea city of Novorossiysk, which is close to the Baptist church's town, alleging it was not authorized to be built. Seventh-day Adventists in the same city have been banned from worshipping altogether. Also in March, two American Mormons were arrested in Russia and later deported to the U.S. They were accused of violating immigration laws.²⁹

In February 2020, the Nevsky District Court in St Petersburg registered a criminal case against the heads and participants of the Church of Scientology. As noted, Ivan Matsitsky, Sahib Aliyev, Galina Shurinova, Anastasia Terentyeva and Konstantsia Esaulkova have been charged with inciting hatred or enmity, illegal business, legalization of funds, and participation in an extremist community.

²⁹ Jason Lemon. Is Religious Persecution in Russia Escalating? Elderly Baptist Pastor Charged for 'Illegal' Missionary Work. *Newsweek*, April 25, 2019. <https://www.newsweek.com/religious-persecution-russia-baptist-pastor-1406134>

In fact, by that time, seven titles of Scientology materials were included in the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Also, by the decision of the courts, the Church of Scientology of Moscow and the Scientology Center of St. Petersburg were liquidated.³⁰

Russia's human rights record, including its history of mistreating religious minorities, was worsening, according to testimony at a February 27, 2020 hearing on Capitol Hill. "Unfortunately, the human rights situation in Russia continues to deteriorate, and just when you think things can't get any worse, they do," said Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., co-chair of the Tom Lantos Commission on Human Rights, at the hearing in the Rayburn House Office Building. Elizabeth Cassidy, director of research and policy at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, said Russia's "malign activities around the globe are clearly evident, yet its systematic, ongoing, egregious repression of religious freedom is less well known." "The Russian government maintains, frequently updates and enforces an array of laws that restrict religious freedom," Cassidy added. "These violations are escalating, spreading through the country and even across its borders," Cassidy said.

In September 2020 the administration of Arkhangelsk began the demolition of a Baptist church. When the parishioners protested and attempted to block the demolition, the police detained nine Baptists.³¹

On October 18, 2020 a group of law enforcers disrupted a Pentecostal religious gathering in the city of Orekhovo-Zuevo in the Moscow Oblast. According to eyewitness accounts, these were personnel from the Prosecutor's Office, the police ("E" Center), and the FSB. The law enforcement officers raided the premises where a worship service was going on for youth at which about ten young people were present, including girls. None of the law enforcers identified himself and the participants in the gathering were not told the purpose of the visit. The officers searched the premises, desk drawers were dumped, documents containing personal data were photographed, the participants' passports were taken and they were not permitted to use their telephones and nobody was allowed to make a call. The participants in the religious gathering were arrested without any procedural documents being drawn up and they were taken to Police

³⁰ В Петербурге зарегистрировали дело против главного саентолога города [In St. Petersburg, Case Filed Against the City's Chief Scientologist]. Gazeta.ru, February 12, 2020.
https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2020/02/12/n_14026747.shtml

³¹ В Архангельске продолжились стычки баптистов с полицией [Clashes between Baptists and Police Have Been Continuing in Arkhangelsk]. Krasnaia Vesna, September 26, 2020.
<https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/64618979>

Department No. 1 of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Orekhovo-Zuevo, where testimonies were taken from everybody. The participants also were finger-printed. The young people were released only after a pastor arrived. A representative of the Prosecutor's Office, who turned out to be an assistant prosecutor, summoned the pastor to the Orekhovo-Zuevo City Prosecutor's Office.³²

On the night of April 7 to 8, 2021 there was an arson attempt on a Baptist church. A man broke the church's window and attempted to throw a packet with incendiary mixture.³³

Russian law enforcement has raided the homes of more than 1,300 worshippers and over 400 have been either charged or convicted of extremism in a brutal crackdown which has swept up followers aged 19 to 90. The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses estimates that between 5,000 to 10,000 of its members have fled Russia since the ban came into force.



Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses attend a court session in Perm, Russia, Wednesday, May 12, 2021. The court handed suspended sentences to five members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Anastasia Yakovleva/AP, FILE

Jehovah's Witnesses are designated in Russia as extremists which contradicts any sense what is extremism about. "If it wasn't so serious, it would be a joke. It's absurd. Jehovah's

³² Moisei Kondrashin. WHO WILL ANSWER FOR LAWLESSNESS? Law enforcement personnel disrupted worship service in Orekhovo-Zuevo. *Religiia i Pravo*, October 20, 2020.

³³ Непрофессиональный поджигатель и сюжет Первого канала. Баптисты Петербурга разбираются с тем, кто и зачем попытался поджечь их церковь (An unprofessional arsonist and the topic of the First Channel. Baptists of St. Petersburg are looking into who and why tried to set fire to their church). *Fontanka.ru*. April 8, 2021. <https://www.fontanka.ru/2020/04/08/69079738/>

Witnesses have been anything but extremist, and we're certainly not dangerous or violent," said Jarrod Lopes, a spokesperson for the group's headquarters in the United States. Jehovah's Witnesses remain politically neutral for religious reasons and do not vote, run for office, or protest. That might have spared them the arrests and harassment levied against protesters and opposition politicians in Russia, but their apolitical stance might have singled them out in other ways. "That looks very suspicious to our authorities," said Alexander Verkhovsky, director of the Moscow-based SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, which tracks discrimination and misuse of Russia's extremism laws.³⁴

The "extremist" designation also means that when police conduct raids on Jehovah's Witnesses, they act as though they are storming hideouts of armed terrorists. Dozens of videos released by law enforcement show officers in full body armor and helmets, often armed with guns and batons, entering the apartments of terrified people. In some cases, police rip down doors with power saws and crow bars.

The show of force is directed against people usually sitting quietly in prayer or otherwise defenseless, asleep in their pajamas. Officers often appear aware there's no threat, sometimes just ringing the door bell and waiting while standing in their combat gear. "It reminds me of the Inquisition," said Evgeny Kandaurov, a journalist and Jehovah's Witness whose home was raided earlier this year.

The regime uses torture against Jehovah's Witnesses. The testimonies of the victims are revealing: "They tied my hands and legs with tape," one of the men, Sergey Volosnikov, 42, told ABC News in an interview last year "They put a bag over my head and put me on the floor. Then they started to close the bag so that air couldn't get in. I was already preparing myself that I'm going toto suffocate to death," he said. Volosnikov said police then tortured him with a stun gun before demanding he sign a confession. The other men described similar torture, telling ABC News they were taken into the room one by one after refusing to confess to extremism charges. Some of the men said the officers threatened to rape them, pulling down their underwear and using a stun gun on their buttocks. Others said police injected them with a liquid and told them it would cause their hearts to stop. "I was lying on the floor, all tied up with the

³⁴ Amy Mackinnon. Why Is Putin Afraid of Jehovah's Witnesses? Foreign Policy, March 26, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/26/why-is-putin-afraid-of-jehovahs-witnesses/>

sack on my head. And they started to discuss some kind of object, right, which they would rape me with," said Artyom Kim, who said he was taken into the room three times, where he was also electrocuted and suffocated. "I was afraid for my life. I was already saying goodbye to all my relatives," he said.³⁵

In September 2021 the regime attacked Scientologists anew. Russia has declared two organizations linked to the U.S.-based Church of Scientology "undesirable," in a move that is likely to lead to the group being banned. The Prosecutor-General's Office said on September 24, 2021 that the World Institute of Scientology Enterprises International and the Church of Spiritual Technology are religious corporations that "pose a threat to the security of the Russian Federation," which became a threat for the existence of the Church of Scientology in the country.³⁶

In October 2021, Russia's Justice Ministry has blacklisted two Church of Scientology entities, banning them from operating in the country. Moscow has taken numerous measures against the group, arguing that it's a business masquerading as religion. An updated list of "*undesirable*" organizations was released by the country's Justice Ministry on Friday, just over a week after the Russian Prosecutor General's office advised a ban for several Church of Scientology affiliates.

Two California-based holdings, the World Institute of Scientology Enterprises International (WISE) and the Church of Spiritual Technology (CST), also known as the "*L. Ron Hubbard Library*," were officially blacklisted. Both were deemed a threat to Russia's national security, according to a previous statement from the prosecutor's office. The inclusion of Scientology on Russia's list of "*undesirable*" organizations, which currently number at 49, means the outfit is now prohibited from conducting any activities in Russia, with its local chapters to be forcibly closed and assets frozen.³⁷

³⁵ Patrick Reeve. Russia's mysterious campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses. ABC News, July 18, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/russias-mysterious-campaign-jehovahs-witnesses/story?id=78629389>

³⁶ Russia Declares Church Of Scientology 'Undesirable.' RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, September 24, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-scientology-undesirable-/31477089.html>

³⁷ Russia bans Scientology: Justice ministry puts key Scientologist groups on list of 'undesirable' organizations. RT, October 2, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/536399-russia-bans-scientology-groups/>

Along with Protestants, other denominations experience a rise of hatred toward them. It includes traditionally hated Jews and Muslims as well as Buddhists, and new groups such as *Falun Gong*.³⁸

Meanwhile, the crackdown on Jehovah's Witnesses continues in Russia. On July 8, 2022, a local resident was detained and brought in for questioning in Severobaikalsk (Republic of Buryatia). It is reported that during the four-hour interrogation she was asked questions about her attitude towards the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. After that, the house where she lives with her husband was searched.³⁹ On July 26, 2022, the Kemerovo Regional Court upheld the sentence against Jehovah's Witness Andrey Vlasov under Part 1 of Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code (organization of the activities of an extremist organization). In May, 2022 the Central District Court of Prokopyevsk sentenced Vlasov to seven years in prison, serving in a penal colony. Vlasov has a disability group II, and he cannot do without outside help.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the court sent a disable person in prison only for his religious beliefs.

Moreover, the Russian authorities use torture against Jehovah's Witnesses as the country cracks down on members convicted of "extremism" with more and more arrests. For example, Mikhail and Yelena Popov were sentenced to fines close to \$10,000 for engaging in "extremist activities related to their membership in the Jehovah's Witnesses." Another member, Vadim Kustenko, whose home in southern Siberian city of Chita was raided by police, said he was beaten and tasered by men who identified as officers of Russia's National Guard. "They handcuffed him, put a hat on his head and over his eyes and drove him away in an unknown

³⁸ Ivan Aleksandrov. Россия расширяет диапазон религиозных гонений: Преследования на религиозной почве, раньше затрагивавшие в основном мусульман и «Свидетелей Иеговы», становятся разнообразнее, затрагивая других «нетрадиционно верующих» [Russia Expands the Range of Religious Persecution: Religious persecution, previously affecting mainly Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses, is becoming more diverse, affecting other "non-traditional believers."]. Eurasianet. October 7, 2021.

<https://russian.eurasianet.org/%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%88%D0%B8%D1%80%D1%8F%D0%B5%D1%82-%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%BD-%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%B7%D0%BD%D1%8B%D1%85-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B9>

³⁹ В Бурятии прошел обыск в доме Свидетелей Иеговы [House of Jehovah's Witnesses searched in Buryatia]. SOVA, July 15, 2022. <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/extremism/counter-extremism/2022/07/d46641/>

⁴⁰ Суд в Кемерове утвердил приговор Свидетелю Иеговы [Court in Kemerovo upholds sentence for Jehovah's Witness]. SOVA, July 27, 2022. <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/extremism/counter-extremism/2022/07/d46690/>

direction,” told Kustenko's lawyer, Artur Ganin. He said they brought him to a forest, where they choked, beat and tasered him in an attempt to get a confession.⁴¹

Overall, the campaign against Jehovah’s Witnesses intensified in Russia within last few years. It ranges from closure of Kingdom Halls to torture and lengthy sentences of the believers.

The April 2017 Russian Supreme Court ruling that banned all Jehovah’s Witnesses organizations in Russia and the law of July 2016, targets non-Orthodox denominations in Russia and makes Protestants, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, one of the primary victims of the growing restrictions, harassment and mistreatment. It allows authorities to prosecute and persecute believers and stirs up Russian nationalists against non-Orthodox Christians.

The Russian regime has been introducing new measures to suppress non-Orthodox denominations. On July 12, 2022, the participants in the meeting of the section on the problems of neutralizing internal threats to national security of the Scientific Council under the Security Council proposed “to intensify work on identifying mechanisms used by foreign states of the activities of religious associations to interfere in the internal affairs of our country [Russia].” “The meeting presented the facts of the negative impact on the situation in the country of some foreign and Russian organizations controlled by them, carrying out their destructive activities under the guise of humanitarian, educational, cultural, national and religious projects. It was noted that "permissiveness" and the use of religious dogmas for negative purposes, which give rise to religious extremism, are practiced in the religious sphere," said Yevgeny Anoshin, spokesman for the Security Council.

The Security Council also proposed to consolidate in Russian legislation the concepts of "religious destructive *sekta*", "foreign religious organization", "traditional religion (confession)" and "non-traditional religion (confession)", "religious extremism", "religious radicalism", "religious fundamentalism.”⁴²

The war in Ukraine allowed the Russian regime to increase its mistreatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists, Pentecostals, Evangelical Christians and other Protestant denominations. The FSB and other security services target them in full force.

⁴¹ Caleb Parke. Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia claim they were 'choked, beat and tasered' by authorities: report. Fox News, February 14, 2020. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/jehovahs-witness-russia-tortured-jailed>

⁴² Совбез РФ предлагает усилить борьбу с иностранными религиозными организациями [Security Council of the Russian Federation proposes to strengthen the fight against foreign religious organizations]. SOVA, August 1, 2022. <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/authorities/legal-regulation/2022/08/d46709/>

As of January 2024, 792 Jehovah's Witnesses were facing criminal prosecution, according to the "Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia" website. The penalties range from fines and suspended sentences to lengthy prison terms. Since the onset of the full-scale war against Ukraine, the situation has significantly worsened, with believers more frequently receiving actual prison sentences and being subjected to solitary confinement. On November 11, 2024 Jehovah's Witness Alexander Lubin passed away in the Kurgan region after his health deteriorated severely following temporary detention in a pre-trial facility. Publicly supporting the war or consenting to recruitment appears to be the only way for Russian Protestants to evade imprisonment.⁴³

Protestant denominations in Russia function within an increasingly restrictive and challenging legal and social framework. While Protestantism has a long-standing presence in the country, particularly among ethnic minorities such as the Germans, it has remained a marginal religious tradition, often regarded with mistrust by both the authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a brief resurgence of Protestant activity, with denominations like Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, and Evangelicals gaining visibility. However, this period of relative openness was curtailed after the adoption of the 2016 "Yarovaya Law," which imposed stringent limitations on missionary efforts and gatherings held outside registered religious sites. Since then, Protestant groups have increasingly faced fines, state inspections, raids, and even dissolution of congregations on charges related to administrative or anti-extremist violations.

The state's approach to Protestant churches aligns with a broader strategy that elevates the Russian Orthodox Church as a central symbol of national cohesion and allegiance. Protestant communities are often cast in official discourse and state media as foreign-influenced or subversive sektas advancing Western interests. This framing contributes to public skepticism and facilitates government actions aimed at curbing their activities. The close cooperation between the state and the Orthodox Church results in a systematic marginalization of religious minorities. Protestant congregations frequently report surveillance, denial of permits for construction or gatherings, and pressure on landlords to revoke rental agreements. Legislation originally intended to combat extremism is now routinely used to suppress religious activity that falls outside the narrow scope of state-approved orthodoxy. As the authorities increasingly equate

⁴³ Kseniya Kirillova. *A Sinister Confessional: Russian Church Persecution*: Protestant clergy and believers are regarded as little better than foreign agents by the Russian authorities, with dire consequences for their freedom to worship. 20 Ceba, December 16, 2024. <https://cepa.org/article/a-sinister-confessional-russian-church-persecution/>

religious deviation with political dissent, members of Protestant denominations risk serious repercussions merely for exercising their faith beyond the bounds endorsed by the Kremlin and the Orthodox hierarchy.