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Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia Brace for a Final Blow

The Jehovah's Witnesses are no strangers to harassment in Putin's Russia. But they may be about to be dealt a final blow.

By Katie Marie Davies

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Alexandr Tyryshkin / Reuters

After more than a decade of legal wrangling, controversial anti-terrorism laws are set to deliver the final blow to Russia's embattled Jehovah's Witnesses.

For years, Russia has chased the group in a tireless game of cat and mouse. Authorities hold shipments of Bibles at the border. Police raids are timed to break up Sunday services. Meeting houses across the country are shuttered.

But now the group's religious leaders say their situation is critical. Prosecutors, who call the group an extremist sect, responsible for tearing apart families and indoctrinating young

people, are now set to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses from the country for good.

"We consider this a serious threat," says Robert Warren, a spokesperson for Jehovah's Witnesses International. "This decision could influence not just Russia, but the whole former Soviet Union," he says.

Russia's 175,000 Jehovah's Witnesses now fear physical attacks, Warren told The Moscow Times.

"We feel this move by the government will actually spark real extremist activity against our believers," he says.

A Tightening Noose

The looming closure is the result of a long and agonising legal process.

Regional branches of the Jehovah's Witnesses have long been viewed with suspicion by officials. The group was banned outright in the Russian city of Taganrog in 2014. Other bans quickly followed in Samara and Abinsk.

Then, in early 2016, the Jehovah's Witnesses' central headquarters near St. Petersburg was issued an official warning to halt their "extremist activity." The warning arrived at the same time as the organization was banned in five more Russian regions: Belgorod, Birobidzhan, Elista, Oryol and Stary Oskol.

The group's final appeal against the warning was rejected in January 2017. Now, authorities can now use any violation of the anti-terror law, — including the distribution of 'extremist' materials — to justify shuttering the Jehovah's Witness headquarters and the organization across the country.

A number of alleged infringements of the law were since discovered during "unscheduled inspection" of the Jehovah's headquarters last month. As part of the raid, the organization was forced to hand over 73,000 pages of documents. They were also asked to hand over a list of its 2,277 ministers leading Russian congregations, a demand which they refused.

'Necessary Evil'

While authorities have the power to shut down the church, they might not follow through, says Roman Lunkin, head of the center for the study of Religion and Society at the Russian Academy of Sciences' European Institute.

"Unlike the Soviet era, Russian authorities are not trying to destroy religion in general," he says. "They will tolerate many 'suspicious' sects or religions as a 'necessary evil' including the Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal churches and some Muslim communities."

Rather, control is key for the intelligence agencies, Lunkin says. This control could come from the impending threat of closure or by liquidating the church's central control center and monitoring regional groups.

"By destroying the Jehovah's Witnesses' centralized management, officials will be able to

better control these communities and monitor the groups scattered across the country."

'Extremist Bibles'

What is more concerning for some analysts is how Russian authorities are using anti-extremism laws — designed to combat terrorists — to gain control over society.

Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of Moscow's SOVA Center, which monitors abuses of anti-extremism legislation, says authorities have followed anti-extremism legislation to the letter in their bid shutter the Jehovah's main centre.

"The problem is that those laws are badly formulated," he said. "It's very difficult for these organizations to exist without violating one law or another."

Law enforcement agencies have focused on the "extremist" literature which Jehovah's Witnesses distribute on streets or by going door to door.

Government-appointed experts — generally working in three-person panels usually comprised of a psychologist, linguist and theologist — have so far banned more than 80 Jehovah's Witnesses publications. In most cases, the bans are for "portraying other religions in a negative light," or for trying to persuade Russian men to avoid compulsory military service.

Not everyone agrees with these experts' testimony.

Lunkin and Verkhovsky fear that anti-extremism laws are often used unfairly by overzealous prosecutors.

"There is a general tendency to [use these laws] in order to increase the police's influence on the public sphere," Lunkin says. "This affects religion too."

With sweeping new anti-terror legislation introduced by Russian President Vladimir Putin just last year, the problem is only set to worsen.

"The legislation we've seen come into play between 2015 and 2016 – laws which see religious groups being forced to register themselves and the monitoring of missionary work – has been the most destructive and repressive we've seen for many years," says Lunkin.

The Jehovah's Witnesses may be among the first organizations to feel the sting of that new legislation. But they say that they will continue to worship regardless.

"My parents were exiled to Siberia because they were Jehovah's Witnesses," says Yaroslav Sivulskiy, a spokesperson for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. "They worshipped even while they were in those camps. We will continue too."

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