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Russia Outlaws Jehovah's Witnesses

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Alexander Demianchuk / TASS

The Russian Supreme Court formally banned Jehovah's Witnesses on Thursday, labeling the group an extremist organization. The religious group in Russia will now be forced to dissolve.

The decision equates Russia's 175,000 Jehovah's Witnesses to terrorist groups like the Islamic State, and makes it illegal for congregations to meet or distribute literature.

The court refused the group's earlier appeals to recognize the organization as victims of political repression, and declined to hear testimony from witnesses who claimed that the Russian police have falsified evidence against regional religious groups.

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Russia's Justice Ministry asked the Supreme Court to ban the organization on March 17, after formally warning the group's headquarters near St. Petersburg to halt “all extremist activity.”

Prosecutors later expanded the case to all 396 registered Jehovah's Witnesses organizations across the country.

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"We are greatly disappointed by this development and deeply concerned about how this will affect our religious activity," said Yaroslav Sivulskiy, a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. "We will appeal this decision, and we hope that our legal rights and protections as a peaceful religious group will be fully restored as soon as possible."

Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia have 30 days to submit their appeal.

The Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and the Jehovah's Witnesses are extremist groups banned in Russia.

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