The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

2 Russian Jehovah's Witnesses Charged With 'Extremism'

January 31, 2020



Rights groups have condemned Russia's crackdown against the Jehovah's Witnesses as a violation of religious freedom. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

Two Jehovah's Witnesses in northern Russia have been charged with extremism, law enforcement authorities said Thursday amid the crackdown on the Christian denomination that Russia banned in 2017.

At least 14 people were detained in the town of Pechora during Tuesday's raids across 10 addresses, the severrealii.org news website reported. It named Gennady Skutelts, 43, and Gennady Polyakevich, 60, among the four people held in detention for more than 24 hours.

Related article: Russia 'Escalating' Jehovah's Witnesses Crackdown – HRW

Russia's Investigative Committee in the republic of Komi said it accused an unidentified 60-year-old worshipper of "continuing the organization's illegal activities in 2018-2019" despite the ban.

“The 43-year-old defendant and other unidentified persons took part in the activities of the aforementioned extremist organization,” it said in a statement.

If found guilty, the two face up to 12 years in prison.

The republic of Komi is the 52nd region where authorities have opened criminal cases against local Jehovah’s Witnesses, according to the religious organization’s database. It estimates that 313 people have been charged or convicted since the Supreme Court banned the Jehovah’s Witnesses as an “extremist” organization in 2017.

The April 2017 ban forced 395 branches across Russia to shut down and at least 5,000 worshippers to flee the country, according to media reports. The Jehovah’s Witnesses group estimates that it has about 170,000 followers in Russia.

Rights groups have condemned the crackdown against the Christian denomination as a violation of religious freedom.

Russian authorities ramped up the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2019, Human Rights Watch said earlier this month.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/01/31/2-russian-jehovahs-witnesses-charged-with-extremism-a69118