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Russia Convicts 6 Jehovah's Witnesses on 'Extremism' Charges

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Russia banned the Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" organization in 2017. **Alexander Artemenkov / TASS**

A court in central Russia has handed suspended sentences to six Jehovah's Witnesses on Thursday, its latest crackdown on the religious organization that it banned three years ago.

A district court in the city of Ulyanovsk 800 kilometers southeast of Moscow found four men and a married couple guilty of organizing or participating in "extremist activity," the Jehovah's Witnesses organization told The Moscow Times.

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The court gave them suspended sentences ranging from two to four years. The court database has classified the details of the case.

Prosecutors last week requested real prison sentences of up to seven years for the worshippers

aged between 35 and 63, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia group said on its website.

"We are pleased that they were not imprisoned, yet it remains a gross injustice for them to be convicted simply for their peaceful Christian worship," Jehovah's Witnesses spokesman Jarrod Lopes said in an email.

He contrasted the Ulyanovsk case with the "courageous" acquittal of a believer in the North Caucasus, the first such ruling since Russia outlawed Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremists."

"Yesterday, in Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, Judge Kudryavtseva courageously issued the first 'not guilty' verdict on one of Jehovah's Witnesses since the 2017 Supreme Court ruling," Lopes said.

"Today's judge, Galina Soshkina, instead aligned herself with those who have facilitated the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, flouting the censure of the international human rights community."

Russia has outlawed an estimated 400 Jehovah's Witnesses branches across the country since the Supreme Court's decision to ban the organization. Russian courts have since issued a series of lengthy sentences against believers, including several European Union nationals.

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