

Russian Court in Crimea Jails Jehovah's Witness for 6.5 Years

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The Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned in Russia as an extremist organization since 2017. **Michael Tapp / Flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0)**

A court in Russia-annexed Crimea [said](#) Monday it has jailed a Jehovah's Witness for six and a half years on charges of organizing an extremist group in the country's latest prison sentence against members of the Christian denomination.

The Sevastopol-based Gagarin district court said in a statement that it found the defendant guilty and sent him to a prison colony. It is one of a litany of sentences handed out to Jehovah's Witnesses since Russia banned the group as an extremist organization in 2017.

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"After his release, he will also be banned from engaging in educational activities, speeches, publications and posting on the internet for seven years," the court said.

The religious group [identified](#) its adherent as Viktor Stashevsky, born in 1966, and called his sentence the “harshest” yet against one of its members in Russian-annexed Crimea.

According to a statement on the group’s website, the state prosecutor had asked the judge to sentence Stashevsky to seven years in prison.

Stashevsky’s indictment, which the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia website said contained the testimony of a secret witness, called him an “ideological inspirer of the extremist organization.”

“If I cease to be Jehovah's Witness, there will be no complaints against me and all charges will be dropped. But [...] I have no intention of giving up my faith in God,” Stashevsky was quoted as saying in his last plea.

According to the court’s statement, the defense has 10 days to appeal the prison sentence.

Stashevsky is at least the third Crimean Jehovah's Witness to be sentenced to at least 6 years in prison over the past year.

Rights groups have criticized Russia’s crackdown against the Christian denomination, known for door-to-door preaching and rejection of military service, as a violation of religious freedom.

The U.S. State Department condemned Russia’s crackdown on Jehovah’s Witnesses “in the strongest possible terms” last month.

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