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Russia Hands Out Longest Jail Terms Yet to Jehovah's Witnesses

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Courts began handing out longer prison terms to Jehovah's Winesses this year. **Kirill Kukhmar / TASS**

A Russian court has handed the country's longest prison sentence yet to a Jehovah's Witness, the independent news website MediaZona reported Wednesday.

More than two dozen Jehovah's Witnesses have been sentenced and scores more are currently in prison or under house arrest since Russia declared the Christian denomination an "extremist" organization in 2017.

Courts began handing out longer prison terms this year, sentencing a Crimean believer to six and a half years in March and a Krasnodar Jehovah's Witness to seven and a half years in February.

The Blagoveshchensk City Court, 7,000 kilometers east of Moscow, found church members Dmitry Golik and Alexei Berchuk guilty of extremism charges and jailed them to seven and eight years, according to MediaZona.

Related article: Russian Court in Crimea Jails Jehovah's Witness for 6 Years

The outlet reported that judge Tatiana Studilko satisfied the state prosecution's sentence request in full.

The Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia organization called the sentences "a new record for cruelty."

MediaZona reported that law enforcement authorities had wiretapped Golik's apartment in 2018, and have kept him and his wife under surveillance for six months.

Rights groups and the U.S. State Department have condemned Russia's crackdown on Jehovah's Witnesses, who are known for door-to-door preaching and an alternative interpretation of the Bible, as a violation of religious freedom.

The Jehovah's Witnesses refusal to take up arms and serve in the military led the Soviet state to prosecute followers for anti-communist activities by exiling thousands to Siberia.

In 2017, Russia's Supreme Court designated the Jehovah's Witnesses an extremist organization, accusing it of "propaganda of exclusivity" and saying its activities exhibit signs of violating public safety.

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