

Russia Sentences Jehovah's Witnesses to Lengthy Prison Terms

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Russia Jehovah's Witnesses. **Anastasia Yakovleva / AP / TASS**

Russian courts have handed lengthy prison sentences to Jehovah's Witnesses for organizing "extremist" activities over the past week in some of the harshest verdicts given to the religious group's members yet.

Russia outlawed the nonconformist Christian denomination in 2017, subjecting thousands of worshippers to criminal prosecution, harassment and intimidation.

Russia's Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, [said](#) Monday that a court in southern Russia's Astrakhan region found four unnamed Jehovah's Witnesses aged 38 to 47 guilty of organizing and participating in "extremist" activity. One female defendant was jailed for 3.5 years, while three male defendants were jailed for 8 years.

The verdicts are tied with another sentence in the Far East Russian Amur region last June for the [longest jail sentence](#) handed to a Jehovah's Witness.

The Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia organization [identified](#) the defendants as Rustam Diarov, Olga and Yevgeny Ivanov and Sergei Klikunov.

“Our ‘fault’ — my ‘fault’ — is only that we sincerely believe in Jehovah God, read the Bible and pray,” Olga Ivanova said during closing arguments.

In the annexed Crimean city of Sevastopol, another court found 49-year-old Jehovah's Witness Igor Shmidt of organizing “extremist” activities and jailed him for 6 years last Friday.

“If Jehovah's Witnesses were extremists, they would be acting like extremists,” the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia quoted Shmidt as saying in closing arguments.

“You will not hear that Jehovah's Witnesses use violence and cruelty against anyone, as well as that Jehovah's Witnesses call for it.”

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 group's 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, the Russian 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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