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Russia Acquits First Jehovah's Witness After Top Court Bans Prosecuting Prayers

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Dmitry Barmakin and his wife Yelena after the acquittal announcement. **Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia**

A Russian Jehovah's witness has been acquitted of extremism for the first time since the country banned the religious group in 2017, the organization said Monday.

A court in the Far East capital of Vladivostok issued the not-guilty verdict less than a month after Russia's Supreme Court ruled that joint prayers among members of banned religious organizations "do not contain elements of extremism."

Related article: Russia's Top Court Bans Prosecuting Jehovah's Witnesses for Group Prayer

The judge acquitted Dmitry Barmakin, who was arrested on extremism charges in July 2018, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia organization said in a statement.

A key witness in Barmakin's case had secretly recorded conversations with him on

assignment from the security services, the group said.

“We are grateful to Judge Stanislav Salnikov for his strength and his sound approach to the case,” said Yaroslav Sivulskiy, a spokesman for the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses. "Of course, it is not easy to be the first judge to interrupt a continuous chain of guilty verdicts and deliver a verdict of acquittal.”

“We hope that all Russian courts in their decisions on cases involving Jehovah's Witnesses will be guided by the decision of the Plenum of the Russian Supreme Court,” Sivulskiy said.

Barmakin’s wife Yelena was also charged with “extremism” in 2019 in a case that now totals 10 defendants, the group said.

Other worshippers have been jailed for up to eight years since Russia’s Supreme Court outlawed the nonconformist Christian denomination as “extremist,” accusing the Jehovah’s Witnesses of “propaganda of exclusivity” and signs of violating public safety.

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