

Europe's Top Rights Court Rules Against Russia's Jehovah's Witnesses Ban

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The building of the European Court of Human Rights. **Guilhem Vellut / flickr (CC BY 2.0)**

Europe's highest human rights court ordered Moscow to overturn its ban on the country's Jehovah's Witnesses Tuesday, just hours before Russian lawmakers passed legislation ending its jurisdiction.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) [said](#) Tuesday that Russia violated 1,444 worshippers' right to religious freedom when it declared the Christian organization an "extremist" group in 2017.

"The court found that the definition of 'extremism' was overly broad in Russian law and had been misused for the prosecution of believers or religious ministers on the basis of the content of their beliefs alone," the ECHR ruled.

The Strasbourg-based court ordered Moscow to release the 91 Jehovah's Witnesses currently in Russian jails, pay 3.5 million euros (\$3.7 million) in damages and either return seized property or pay 60 million euros (\$64 million) in compensation.

But Russia seems unlikely to carry out the judgment, with lawmakers swiftly [passing legislation](#) Tuesday to end the ECHR's jurisdiction. The bill, which must now be approved by Russia's upper house of parliament and signed by President Vladimir Putin, sets March 16 as the [cut-off date](#) for recognized rulings.

The court itself had said it would continue receiving claims from Russia until Sept. 16, when it would no longer be party to the European Convention on Human Rights.

The ECHR has been one of the few remaining legal recourses for Russians to seek justice for political persecution and human rights violations.

An association of Russian lawyers said last week it was developing a [domestic alternative](#) to the ECHR.

The Council of Europe, which oversees the court, [suspended](#) then expelled Russia in March following its invasion of Ukraine.

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