

Russia's top court bans Jehovah's Witnesses

by [Doug Stanglin](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue

Russia's Supreme Court formally banned Jehovah's Witnesses as an extremist organization and ordered the state to seize its property in Russia, according to Russian news media.

The court, after six days of hearings, ordered the closing of the group's Russia headquarters and its 395 local chapters on April 20.

The Interfax news agency quoted Justice Ministry attorney Svetlana Borisova in court as saying the Jehovah's Witnesses pose a threat to Russians.

"They pose a threat to the rights of the citizens, public order, and public security," she told the court.

Borisova also said the Jehovah's Witnesses' opposition to blood transfusions violates Russian health-care laws.

"We are greatly disappointed by this development and deeply concerned about how this will affect our religious activity," said Yaroslav Sivulskiy, a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. "We will appeal this decision, and we hope that our legal rights and protections as a peaceful religious group will be fully restored as soon as possible."

In a statement on its website, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia said, "This decision may lead to very dire consequences for the faithful of different religions, as well as for Russia's image in the world arena."

During the hearing, one witness, identified as Natalia Koretskaya from St. Petersburg, testified that she was a member of the group from 1995 to 2009, TASS news agency reported. She said top church officials purported to enforce church rules "but in real fact the talk is about total control of an individual's personal life—his intimate life, education, and work."

Representatives of the group countered that such testimony had been prepared ahead of time to advance the state's arguments, TASS said.

Jehovah's Witnesses representatives said they will appeal the decision, according to TASS. The organization's spokesman said if the appellate panel of Supreme Court judges upheld Thursday's verdict, the case would be taken to the European Court of Human Rights.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, which has some 175,000 followers in Russia, first legally registered as a religious group in Russia in 1991 and reregistered in 1999, according to the organization's international website.

The case reached the Supreme Court following a lawsuit by Russia's Justice Ministry.

In February, investigators inspected the headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses in St. Petersburg, the independent Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reported. More than 70,000 pages of documents were confiscated for the General Prosecutor's Office, according to Russia's Sova Center for Information and Analysis, which monitors hate crimes and the enforcement of antiextremist laws.

The religious group's press service said its religious programs do not include banned materials and that officials have notified authorities whenever anyone brings such literature into their building. In 2009, the Supreme Court of Russia upheld a lower court ruling that declared 34 pieces of Jehovah's Witnesses literature as "extremist," including their magazine the *Watchtower* in Russian.

The group has been officially banned from the port city of Taganrog since 2009, after a local court ruled the organization guilty of inciting religious hatred by "propagating the exclusivity and supremacy" of their religion, according to the British newspaper the *Independent*.

In 2015, a court in Rostov convicted 16 Jehovah's Witnesses of practicing extremism in Taganrog. The court handed out jail sentences—later suspended—of more than five years for five of the defendants and stiff fines for the others.

That same year, the Supreme Court of Russia banned the religion's international website as "extremist." —*USA Today*

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