

Persecution in Russia and Kazakhstan worsens for Jehovah's Witnesses

by [Lauren Markoe](#) and [Fred Weir](#)

This article appears in the [June 21, 2017](#) issue.

Since the Russian Supreme Court labeled Jehovah's Witnesses an extremist group, vandals have targeted followers and their bank accounts have been frozen. People have thrown stones at a St. Petersburg assembly hall and tried to burn the Moscow home of a Jehovah's Witness to the ground, a church spokesman said.

The ruling seems to have emboldened those who resent and fear the Witnesses, a religious minority that upholds pacifism, eschews military service, and has suffered more than most in President Vladimir Putin's Russia, where the Russian Orthodox Church enjoys the backing of the state.

"We were hoping the court would realize that we are not a threat," said Robert Warren, a spokesman for the Witnesses based in their New York world headquarters. "But now the environment is worse than ever."

While Jehovah's Witnesses prepare an appeal—and take heart in the condemnation of the court ruling from national and international bodies, including the U.S. State Department—they are not optimistic about a reversal of the ruling. And they worry for their brethren over the border in Kazakhstan, a former Soviet republic.

Earlier this month, a 61-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Kazakhstan who is battling cancer was sentenced to five years in prison and banned from preaching for three years after he gets out. A court convicted Teymur Akhmedov of inciting "ethnic, social, religious, family, and racial hatred." Jehovah's Witnesses said he peacefully shared his beliefs with a group of young men who asked him questions about his faith.

Witnesses are working on Akhmedov's appeal and say that since the Russian Supreme Court decision, anti-Witness propaganda has spread in Kazakhstan. Recently a popular television channel there reported that Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia are planning a bombing, said Bekzat Smagulov, a Jehovah's Witness and

spokesman on the Akhmedov case.

“Most people are afraid,” Smagulov said of Kazakhstan’s 18,000 Witnesses.

If appeals in Russia and Kazakhstan fail, Jehovah’s Witnesses say they will take the cases to the European Court of Human Rights.

Meanwhile, worship continues at some of the Kingdom Halls where Russia’s more than 100,000 Witnesses gather.

On a Tuesday evening at Moscow’s largest Kingdom Hall, it’s a hive of activity. In one room a few dozen people are engaged in Bible reading; in another they are singing hymns.

There is no outward sign of awareness of the Supreme Court decision, the first major post-Soviet instance in which Russia has moved to outlaw an entire religion.

Some see the hand of the powerful Russian Orthodox Church behind the decision, but even among Russian Orthodox themselves, there is concern that the absolute ban of an entire sect goes too far. The faith has existed in Russia for more than a century and is practically the only such group to have survived the long Soviet winter by developing underground networks that successfully defied the secret police of the Stalin and Brezhnev eras.

“Banning [the Jehovah’s Witnesses] from the legal space, excluding it from social life completely, is an idea that did not work even in Stalin’s times,” said Vsevolod Chaplin, a former spokesman for the Orthodox Church. “We should be more careful about this.”

The Supreme Court ban, which is one short appeal away from being handed to police to enforce, will mandate seizure of all the group’s property and open its Russian members to criminal charges if they persist in publicly expressing beliefs and carrying out missionary work.

In the more than two decades since Russia passed a law limiting the legal rights of faiths that are not one of the four religions considered traditional—Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism—the Jehovah’s Witnesses have faced dozens of local bans, seen their literature prohibited as extremist, and had several of their activists jailed.

But the new ruling comes under a new law Putin signed last July, the Yarovaya's Act, which authorized sweeping new powers for security services to crack down on all kinds of extremist activity. One section of the law mandates much tougher restrictions on the activities of small religious denominations, particularly their ability to proselytize. The Jehovah's Witnesses, who see missionary work as a command from God, were on a collision course with the Russian state even before the latest court decision.

"I am instructed to go out and tell people what I have read in the Bible, and I will do that regardless of what decisions the government takes," said Yury Terteryan, a sports journalist and a Jehovah's Witness. "How can you stop people from sharing good news?"

Most faiths considered nontraditional have had difficulties in post-Soviet Russia. Even the Roman Catholic Church, which has about 800,000 members in Russia, has found itself under pressure, often from zealous local Orthodox communities. But recent rapprochement between the Vatican and the Orthodox Church has probably eliminated any threat that Catholics might be targeted under the Yarovaya law.

The Church of Scientology, which is controversial everywhere, was shut down by the Supreme Court last year, for "noncompliance" with laws regulating religious organizations. The Orthodox Church hailed that decision, publicly denouncing Scientology as an "affront to human freedom."

Many other groups have experienced chronic problems, including Hindus, whose holy book, the Bhagavad Gita, was nearly banned as extremist by a local court five years ago. Baptists and other smaller evangelical Christian groups, who often do not register with authorities, report constant harassment from police and local Orthodox communities.

Most of those who make proselytizing a core activity worry that they will be targeted more systematically under the new law. The Witnesses liken themselves to early Christians.

"I don't wish to be thrown to the lions," said Yevgeny Kandaurov, an elder of the congregation in Moscow. "That's not what I choose. But I will stick to my faith whatever happens."

Andrei Kuraev, a professor at the Orthodox Church's Spiritual Academy in Moscow, warns that all freedom of conscience is under attack.

“Sure, the Jehovah’s Witnesses are far from blameless; they are a totalitarian sect who control their adherents and spread bad information about other faiths,” he said. “But sometimes our Orthodox preachers do the very same things. . . . We should have equal conditions. The state should stay out of it and not under any circumstances try to play the role of arbiter.” —Religion News Service; [The Christian Science Monitor](#)

A version of this article, which was edited on June 2, appears in the June 21 print edition under the title “Persecution in Russia and Kazakhstan worsens for Jehovah’s Witnesses.”