

Droits de l'homme sans frontières

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Russia

Religious Freedom Issues

A chronology of events: January – December 2011

8 January

In the city of Kaliningrad, local residents have protested the construction of a mosque in the South Park, a monument to the region's cultural heritage. Local Muslims first received permission to construct a mosque in 1993, but have had their efforts interrupted repeatedly.

10 January

The city court of Karnyshlov (Sverdlovsk province) ruled that the local Department of Internal Affairs acted illegally when it confiscated religious material and arrested several members of the Jehovah's Witnesses in August 2009. The court's ruling followed the precedent set by European Court of Human Rights in 2007, in which the interruption of Jehovah's Witness' worship services by local authorities in Cheliabinsk were found to be illegal

17 January

Two Jehovah's Witnesses were accused of "inciting hatred and enmity" in violation of Article 282 (1) of Russia's Criminal Code. Investigators filed charges against Maksim Kalinin of Yoshkar-Ola (Mari El region) and Pavel Stegachyov of Tambov (Tamblov Oblast region), despite evidence of illegal phone tapping and surveillance.

18 January

- Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, head the Russian Orthodox Church's social affairs department, criticized Russians for immodest dress and proposed a "national dress code." Feminists and others accused the archpriest of attempting to justify rape by blaming women for dressing improperly.

- The Russian Ministry of Justice placed several new materials, including magazines of the Jehovah's Witness church, on the Federal List of Extremist Materials.

20 January

Rashid Abdullov, a citizen of Azerbaijan and follower of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi, was arrested during a raid on his home in the city of Ulyanovsk (Ulyanovsk region). Abdullov was accused of possessing materials written by Said Nursi and which are found on the Federal List of Extremist Materials.

8 February

Agents from Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) raided 6 Jehovah's Witnesses homes in the southwestern city of Akhtubinsk (Astrakhan Oblast), including that of Elena Grigorieva, age 43. Grigorieva reported that early on the morning of 8 February five men entered her apartment and conducted a six-hour search for "extremist" religious materials. The FSB agents said a criminal case had been opened against Grigorieva two days before and they were authorized to conduct the search. The agents seized her passport and telephone and confiscated several religious books, personal letters, and a computer.

10 February

The decision to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses from distributing religious materials was upheld by Russia's Ninth Arbitration Court of Appeals. On 26 April 2010 the Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Communication (Roskomnadzor) withdrew the church's permits to distribute its "Awake!" and "Watchtower" magazines, citing them as "extremist." The ban was appealed by the church, but was upheld by the Moscow Arbitration Court in October 2010 and most recently by the Ninth Arbitration Court.

11 February

Elena Grigorieva whose house was invaded on the 8th of February was forced to resign from her work "to avoid problems because staff members from a ministry that did not wish to be identified went to her work to put pressure on the administration of the institution.

15 February

- Contrary to federal law, officials from Tiumen province's Ministry of Justice demanded the financial records and tax documents of several Evangelical churches, as well as the private information of members of the churches. The actions violated Russia's 1996 law exempting religious organizations from financial and tax reports and a 2006 law preventing the Ministry of Justice from collecting the personal information of members of religious communities.
- The Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow were denied a reassessment of a 2004 decision to close the community. The decision by the Golovinsky District Court (Moscow) comes

in direct opposition to a 2010 decision by the European Court of Human Rights stating that the Russian government could not ban the Jehovah's Witness community of Moscow.

22 February

The Armenian Catholic community of Moscow was once again unable to register as a religious organization because officials refuse to consider a required document showing that the community has been existing in Russia for at least 15 years. The Armenian Catholics first submitted the document in October 2009.

24 February

Deputies of the Belgorod Provincial Duma reviewed at a regular session additions to the regional Code of Administrative Violations of Law. The document, which was adopted unanimously, introduces penalty fines for persons who distribute religious literature but do not have documents indicating their status as "official representatives" of a specific religious organization. The prohibition establishes fines for its violators of from 500 to 1,000 rubles. The Belgorod innovations were the consequence of the change in Article 17 of the Federal Law on freedom of conscience and religious association, which prohibits preaching without the authorization of a religious organization.

3 March

Human Rights Watch reported that officials in the region of Chechnya enforced an Islamic dress code for women and permitted acts of violence against women in order to compel them into compliance. Russian federal officials condemned the practice but took no steps to end it.

10 March

The city of Blagoveshchensk (Amur region) filed a civil suit against the "New Generation" Pentecostal church accusing it of using "psychological and psychotherapeutic" media. The Blagoveshchensk city court ruled partially in favor of the city. The court banned the distribution of 15 DVDs of "New Generation" sermons, seminars, and television programs. The court ruled that these materials "may have a negative impact on the psychological health of a person."

17 March

In the Moscow suburb of Ivanteevka two Jehovah's Witnesses, Ekaterina Zharenova and Maria Kuriatnikova, were arrested while proselyting. The women were taken to a local internal affairs department where they were searched and had their religious literature and Bibles confiscated.

18 March

Proposed amendments to Russia's 1997 Religion Law that would ban the distribution of religious literature by anyone who is not officially mandated by a registered religious

organisations received the initial backing of the Committee on Social and Religious Organisations of the State Duma in Moscow. The Committee set 30 April as the deadline for comments on the amendments and aims for their consideration by the State Duma in June 2011.

22 March

The Evangelical Christian-Baptists of Moscow sent a letter to the presidency of the Russian Federation in protest to proposed amendments to federal religious laws. The amendments would restrict the ability of religious organizations to distribute religious material and spread their beliefs. The letter, signed by 80 members of the Christian-Baptist Churches, states that “the draft law... is intended to severely restrict... one of the basic human rights guaranteed by the constitution of the state.”

27 March

The Jehovah’s Witnesses of Russia celebrated their 20 years of registration in Russia. They were officially recognized in the country on 27 March, 1991 and now number nearly 162,182 members in 2,339 congregations.

29 March

In eastern Siberia’s Zabaykalsky Krai region, authorities carried out three raids on Jehovah’s Witness homes. At 7 a.m., officials entered the home of Andrei Antonov without a warrant. Antonov and his family were questioned about their personal and religious lives. At 11 a.m. the same authorities raided, without a warrant, the home of Vasily and Lidia Bzovi and confiscated religious literature. At 3 p.m. the officials entered the home of Valey Sarchuk and questioned him for several hours.

30 March

In the north-east Moscow suburb of Yaroslavl, security services raided the apartment of Kamil Isaev, a citizen of Azerbaijan. With Isaev at the time of the raid were Ramzi Ramazanov of Azerbaijan and Golibzhon Karimov of Uzbekistan. Several religious texts, including works by Said Nursi, were confiscated, as well as Karimov’s passport and migration documentation.

4 April

The European Court of Human Rights began examination of two complaints of Russian followers of Said Nursi against Russia. The complaints challenge the ban on Nursi texts by Orenburg region’s Buguruslan city and Moscow’s Koptevo District Court.

8 April

- The Amur provincial court overturned the 10 March decision of the Blagovenshchensk city court against the “New Generation” Pentecostal church. The provincial court

struck down the previous decision, which found several “New Generation” DVDs to have “psychological and psychotherapeutic” effects.

- The Tambov Province Investigation Committee denied the petition of Pavel Stegachev, who was cited on with “inciting hatred and enmity” in violation of Article 282 (1) of Russia’s Criminal Code on 17 January. Stegachev argued that the opinion of the Center for Religious Studies Research of Tambov State University should not be admitted as evidence to his trial because the Center is active in anti-sect activity.
- Evangelical churches in eastern Russia’s Republic of Sakha received questionnaires from the local police’s Center for Combating Extremism inquiring into the churches’ financial and proselyting activities. The questionnaire asks questions about sources of funding, private contact information of priests and members, missionary activity and their places of origin.

11 April

The Tomsk regional court ordered officers to demolish allegedly illegal housing structures near Kandinka village, Tomsk province. The settlements were inhabited by members of the Tomsk Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishna). The Krishnas appealed the decision and are now seeking permission to construct 57 dormitories near the village.

12 April

An Orthodox church being constructed in Moscow’s East Degunino region was attacked by a group of criminals. Construction of the church has been debated for some time. At a public hearing concerning the construction, small group of individuals insulted the Orthodox faith and issued threats against those who supported the church.

14 April

Jehovah’s Witness Aleksandr Kalistratov was acquitted of extremism charges under Article 282 of the Criminal Code. Kalistratov was accused of distributing copies of religious works banned by the Gorno-Altai City Court in southern Russia. Judge Marina Sokolvskaya ruled that the prosecution had not proven that Kalistratov actually distributed the literature. Kalistratov was the first Jehovah’s Witness put on trial in post-Soviet Russia.

17 April

Leonid Frolov, Head of Administration for Revyakino Municipality, Irkutsk, forced entry into a private residence where a meeting of the Jehovah’s Witnesses was taking place. Frolov fired a pistol into the air, broke furniture, issued death threats, and assaulted two people.

26 April

The second congress of All-Russian Fellowship of Evangelical Christians (VSEKh) was held in Moscow, bringing together over 700 delegates from around Russia and foreign countries such as Latvia, Germany, the United States, and Israel. The congress also received delegates

from the Russian presidency, the government of Moscow, Russian Duma's Commission on Affairs of Public Associations and Religious Organizations, and the Moscow patriarchate. The congress discussed the progress made in recognizing Protestant Christianity as a "traditional confession" in Russia, as well as obstacles still facing the faith.

27 April

- The Altai regional prosecutor appealed the 14 April acquittal of Jehovah's Witness Aleksandr Kalistratov, citing that "the verdict of acquittal granted Kalistratov is baseless in view of the discrepancy between the conclusions of the court and the factual circumstances of the case and also in view of the incorrect judgment of the case."
- The Ministry of Justice of Kamchatka in northeastern Russia closed the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka Jewish Society, a society for Orthodox Jews and member of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia. The Ministry of Justice claimed it closed the society because it failed to provide reports on the society's financial and religious activity, use of property, and the personal information of its religious leaders.
- The Khabarovsk Regional Court in Russia's Far East upheld a 24 February 2011 decision to ban the Protestant Grace Church of Khabarovsk. The Grace Church was accused of employing preaching methods, such as saying prayers loudly, speaking in "tongues," and faith "healings," that "changed the psychological state" of its members.

28 April

A trial regarding the labeling of Jehovah's Witness materials "extremist" opened in the city of Salsk, Rostov province. Five issues of the religious magazines "Watchtower" and "Awake!" were first deemed "extremist" in 2010.

6 May

- The Jehovah's Witnesses of Russia filed an appeal against the Ninth Arbitration Court of Moscow's refusal to hear a suit against the Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Communication (Roskomnadzor). The decision to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses from distributing religious materials was upheld by Russia's Ninth Arbitration Court of Appeals in January. On 26 April 2010 the Roskomnadzor withdrew the church's permits to distribute its "Awake!" and "Watchtower" magazines, citing them as "extremist." The ban was appealed by the church, but was upheld by the Moscow Arbitration Court in October 2010 and most recently by the Ninth Arbitration Court.
- In the western Russian town of Sharya, Kostroma province, Jehovah's Witness Nikolai Golotaistrov was arrested and interrogated by police. According to Golotaistrov, the police hit him in the face and demanded the names and addresses of other Jehovah's Witnesses in the area.

- Russian Islam expert Roman Silantyev encouraged Russia to protect traditional Muslims against radical Islamic ideas (Wahabism). Speaking at a conference in Moscow, Silantyev said that most Wahabis live in the North Caucasus and number in the hundreds of thousands. He further stated that ordinary Muslims generally oppose Wahabism and that Russia needs “to provide more effective physical protection to traditional Muslims” in order to contain Wahabism.

18 May

Muslim Ziyautdin Dapayev, 29, was sentenced to three years in prison for possessing banned religious literature written by Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Dapayev was labeled an “extremist” and accused of being “deliberately engaged in attracting residents of Dagestan to study and spread the teaching of Said Nursi.” Dapayev appealed the decision.

19 May

A recent survey found 26% of Russians feel that the Russian Orthodox Church is excessively involved in social and political affairs. The survey asked “From your point of view, is the allegation true or untrue that the social and political activity of the Russian church has become excessive recently?” 46% of those surveyed responded that the Church is not overly involved, while 27% had no opinion.

25 May

The Russian Supreme Court upheld the legality of using government funds to construct a Russian Orthodox Church for “cultural” purposes. In 2010 the region of Petrozavodsk, located on the border with Finland, the regional government allocated 13 million rubles to the construction of the church of St. Panteleimon. The use of state funds was opposed the Young Rights Advocates Group.

26 May

Officials from the Center for Combatting Extremism in the North Caucasus republic of Adygei disrupted a Jehovah’s Witness worship service in the village of Krasnogvardeiskoe after receiving a phone call about a suspicious gathering. The officials searched the home where the meeting was taking place and sent the believers away.

7 June

The Russian Supreme Court upheld a 2010 decision to suspend indefinitely the activities of the evangelical drug rehabilitation organization “Transformation of Russia.” The Ministry of Justice accused “Transformation of Russia” in November 2010 of engaging in illegal business practices, such as failure to provide full financial disclosure and copyright infringement (the organization’s logo is identical to the official Moscow coat of arms.) “Transformation in Russia” operates nearly 400 facilities involving 7,000 staff and patients.

17 June

The United Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Krasnoyarsk region in central Siberia was fined 170,000 rubles (4,200€ or US\$6,100) by the Krasnoyarsk Central District Court for operating religious education classes without an educational license. Approximately 200 students attend religious classes at the Krasnoyarsk mosque. An official from the office of Russia's Human Rights Ombudsperson called the fine "stupidity and a violation of the rights of religious believers," explaining that religious organizations do not need licenses if their classes are conducted separately from the state.

22 June

- The Russian State Duma declared the controversial restrictions on the distribution of religious material to be unconstitutional. The amendments, requiring distributors of religious material to be authorized by a recognized religious organization, was proposed by the Belgorod region дума in early 2011.
- Three men, between 19 and 24-years-old, from the city of Khabarovsk were found guilty of attempted arson of a Jewish cultural center and synagogue. On 13 September 2009 the group of young men attempted to burn down the synagogue as well as the home of an officer of the Center for Combatting Extremism of the Ministry of Internal Affairs for that region. No damage was sustained to either building. The youths possessed nationalist and anti-Semitic material. Though found guilty, all sentences were suspended.

28 June

After a year-long trial Nursi reader Asylzhan Kelmukhambetov was found guilty of possessing "extremist" literature and sentenced to 18-months in prison. The 42-year-old Muslim man was accused of conducting religious courses illegally in a private home between 2008 and 2009 in Orenburg, a city along the border with Kazakhstan, and spreading the teachings of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, which are banned in Russia.

30 June

A Moscow court banned books by Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard. The court accused the books of containing "calls for extremist activities." If the decision is upheld, the books would be placed on Russia's list of extremist literature. The books had been recently removed from the list in May 2011.

5 July

The Supreme Court of Russia overturned the 24 February ban on the Grace Church of Khabarovsk; however, the Khabarovsk Regional Court has initiated new procedures against the church's leaders and membership. The Grace Church was accused of failing to maintain proper financial records as well as employing preaching methods, such as saying prayers

loudly, speaking in “tongues,” and faith “healings,” that “changed the psychological state” of its members.

18 July

A Baptist conscientious objector was held in a psychiatric hospital since 1 July for observation following his refusal to take up arms. Igor Shlak, a 20-year-old Baptist, refused to serve in his military unit, desiring instead to perform alternative service. Six months before being called into the military, Shlak submitted written requests to the Tyumen and Nizhnetavdinsk Districts Military Enlistment Office in central Russia. He was told that he had not been selected for alternative service.

8 August

In the city of Chelyabinsk police raided the home of Muslim Nursi reader Gulnaz Valeyeva, claiming to have thwarted a suicide bomber plot. The home is used by local Muslim women for prayer. Police confiscated over 500 pamphlets and other religious material as well as instructions for preparing explosives. Local Muslims claim the instructions were planted by the raiding police.

8 August

The home of Nursi reader Farida Ulmaskulova was raided by police officers while she was conducting a religious education class for Muslim girls between the ages of 11 and 17 in the village of Aznalino, Safakuleev district, Kurgan region. Police confiscated religious texts, course materials, and DVDs. The girls were detained and questioned, being released in the evening.

25 August

Police officers and government officials carried out 19 simultaneous searches on Jehovah’s Witnesses’ homes in the Sea of Azov city of Taganrog. Church leaders say that such search raids are designed to intimidate and subdue the religion.

7 September

- Ustina Chernishoff of Brazil was found in a community of Russian Old Believers on the banks of the Yenisei River in Siberia. Chernishoff, 23, was reported to Interpol as missing by her mother in Brazil after Chernishoff stopped sending letters. Chernishoff moved to the community with her father and brother in 2006 and spent much of her time making copies of religious texts. The Old Believers are Orthodox Christians who broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th Century.
- Nursi reader Rashid Abdulov was sentenced to one year of compulsory labor for extremism. The Ulyanovsk Prosecutor’s Office stated that they felt the sentence was too light, preferring instead a 4-year sentence in a labor camp. Abdulov, a citizen of Azerbaijan, was first detained in January by the Russian secret service on charges of spreading Nursi teachings.

- In the Chuvash Republic of western Russia, three Jehovah's Witnesses were taken into custody while police searched their and other Witnesses' homes. The police seized Bibles, personal computers, legal documents, and personal valuables. In the Chuvash cities of Cheboksary, Novocheboksarsk, and Kanash, Jehovah's Witness worship services were interrupted by police and members were searched and fingerprinted.

9 September

In the region of Belgorod, the Federal Migration Service raided the Friday prayers of the local Muslim community Peace and Creation. Masked police interrupted the prayers and detained over 150 men. The men were searched, had their cell phones confiscated, and were taken to various police stations. The police said that the raid was aimed at "uncovering illegal migrants" and other migration violations, though only six of the detained were found to be illegal migrants. Local Muslims believe the raid was a response to a local television news report on the Muslim's celebration of Ramadan, which boasted over 1000 attendees.

19 September

The Yoshkar-Ola City Court ordered five internet service providers (ISPs) to block access to two Jehovah's Witness websites. Prosecutor Andrei Nazarov argued that the sites jw.org and watchtower.org contain some works that are currently on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, prompting the court to ban access to the sites. A third site, jw-media.org, was also blocked even though it was not mentioned in the official ruling.

20 September

The Lenin District Court rejected the appeal of Nursi reader Ziyautdin Dapayev's three-year prison sentence. Dapayev, 29, was sentenced under "extremism" for possessing banned religious literature written by Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Dapayev was accused of being "deliberately engaged in attracting residents of Dagestan to study and spread the teaching of Said Nursi." Over 1,800 books, pamphlets, and other materials were taken from Dapayev's home and turned over to the Muslim Board of Dagestan, a city along the Caspian Sea, with the instruction that the literature be destroyed.

2 October

In a letter presented at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, the Brussels-based human rights NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers called on the Russian government to: revise Article 14 of the Law on Freedom of conscience and association; end the misuse of Article 282 of the Criminal Code in harassing religious groups; end the harassment against Jehovah's Witnesses and Nursi readers; dissolve the Ministry of Justice's Expert Council for conducting State-Religious Studies; and to fully implement the decisions of the European Court concerning freedom of religion.

7 October

- The Russian Ministry of Justice proposed amendments to Russia's religious law. The proposed amendments would: require all religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice, even if the groups do not plan on seeking the status of a legal entity; limit the teaching of religious doctrines to officially registered religious associations; permit religious organizations to publish books and teach children only if the group belongs to a centralized religious association; and allow the state to reject or revoke religious registration if the "goals and activities" of the group violate Russian law. The proposed law would effectively eliminate the legal distinctions between religious "organizations" and "groups." Under current law, religious "groups" in Russia are allowed to operate privately and without being registered, allowing small groups of citizens to easily organize themselves in religious groups for the purpose of religious studies and prayer meetings.
- The Kemerovo diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church protested against the entry of Andrei Matuizhov into the All-Russia National Front (ONF), a wing of Vladimir Putin's ruling United Russia party. Matuizhov is a former pastor of the "Love of Christ" evangelical church, which was closed by authorities in 2007 for allegedly violating religious laws. Matuizhov then joined the "New Generation" evangelical church, which was accused of extremism. Upon hearing of Matuizhov's intent to join ONF, the Kemerovo diocese issued a statement to believers to oppose Matuizhov's inclusion, stating that he might "lobby for ideas that will not serve the strengthening of our society but its moral degradation."

10 October

In the city of Tomsk the Ministry of Justice sought to place the Hare Krishna text "The Bhagavad-Git As It Is" on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Prosecutors claimed that the book "contains signs of incitement of religious hatred and humiliation of an individual based on gender, race, ethnicity, language, origin or attitude to religion." The Tomsk Region Ombudsperson of Human Rights, Nelli Krechetova, criticized the accusation, stating that it was an attempt to restrict the religious freedom of Hare Krishnas.

12 October

An Evangelical Christian-Baptist church in Vladivostok, located near the eastern border with China, was vandalized when a small group threw stones at windows.

3 November

Following the appeal of the Gorno-Altai Prosecutor's Office, the Gorno-Altai City Court reversed the acquittal of Jehovah's Witness Aleksandr Kalistratov and found him guilty of inciting religious hatred, sentencing him to 100 hours of community service. Human rights NGO Amnesty International called the decision "an attack against freedom of expression, of opinion, and freedom of confession." Kalistratov was acquitted of extremism charges under Article 282 of the Criminal Code on 14 April. Kalistratov was accused of distributing copies

of religious works banned by the Gorno-Altai City Court. Kalistratov was the first Jehovah's Witness put on trial in post-Soviet Russia.

Mid-November

The sms message system operated by Russia's Hare Krishna's was shut down without warning by the Russian communications company NSS. The message system allows the 3,000 subscribers to send daily quotes, announcements, and event notices. It is unknown whether the government was involved in the shutdown.

2 December

Four of the nine Jehovah's Witnesses works banned by the Salsk court in June were officially placed on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Additionally, nine other works were ruled "extremist" by the far eastern Sakhalin region's Makarov District Court on 18 October. Officials from the religion claim that they were not informed of the Makarov decision until 11 November.

8 December

In a new report on the website www.jw-media.org, the Jehovah's Witnesses documented over 1,000 instances of religious intolerance from 2009 to 2011. Religious discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses on the part of Russian officials and the general public has increased severely, consisting of over 120 home raids, 500 instances of interfering with proselyting activity, and 420 detentions or arrests.

12 December

An article on Russian "anti-sect" websites was published, criticizing the bigotry and falsehoods spread by these websites. The criticisms were aimed at Alexander Dvorkin, head of the Ministry of Justice's and vice-president of the pan-European anti-sect organization FECRIS, and Alexander Kuzmin, Member of the Expert Council for Conducting Religious Studies Expert Analysis and operator of several "anti-sect" websites. The sites contain articles accusing non-Orthodox religions of witchcraft, murder, rape, and other crimes.

22 December

- The Jehovah's Witness Aleksandr Kalistratov was acquitted of spreading "enmity and hatred" in the Siberian city of Altai. Kalistratov had previously been found guilty of inciting religious hatred and sentenced to 100 hours of community service. He appealed the decision, having once been found innocent at the original trial which took place on 14 April.
- A Russian court banned several pieces of Falun Gong literature, including its main text "Zhuan Falun." The human rights NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers suggested that the decision may have come due to pressure from China, which is attempting to stamp out Falun Gong.

28 December

The Tomsk City Court refused to classify the Hare Krishna text “Bhagavad Gita As It Is” as “extremist.” The decision came partially in response to protests in India over the case. Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna called the case an attack on the “very soul of our great civilization.”